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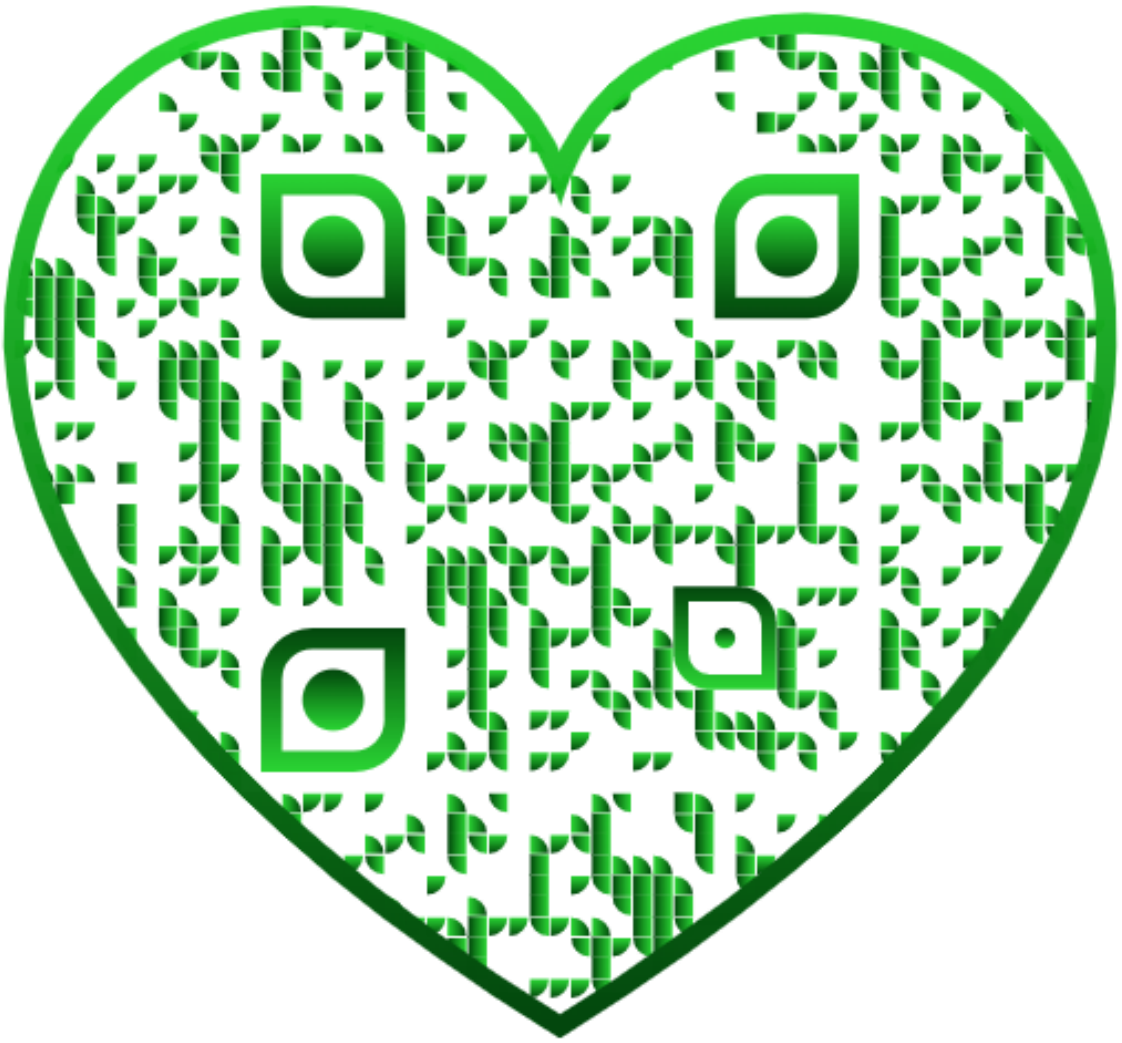

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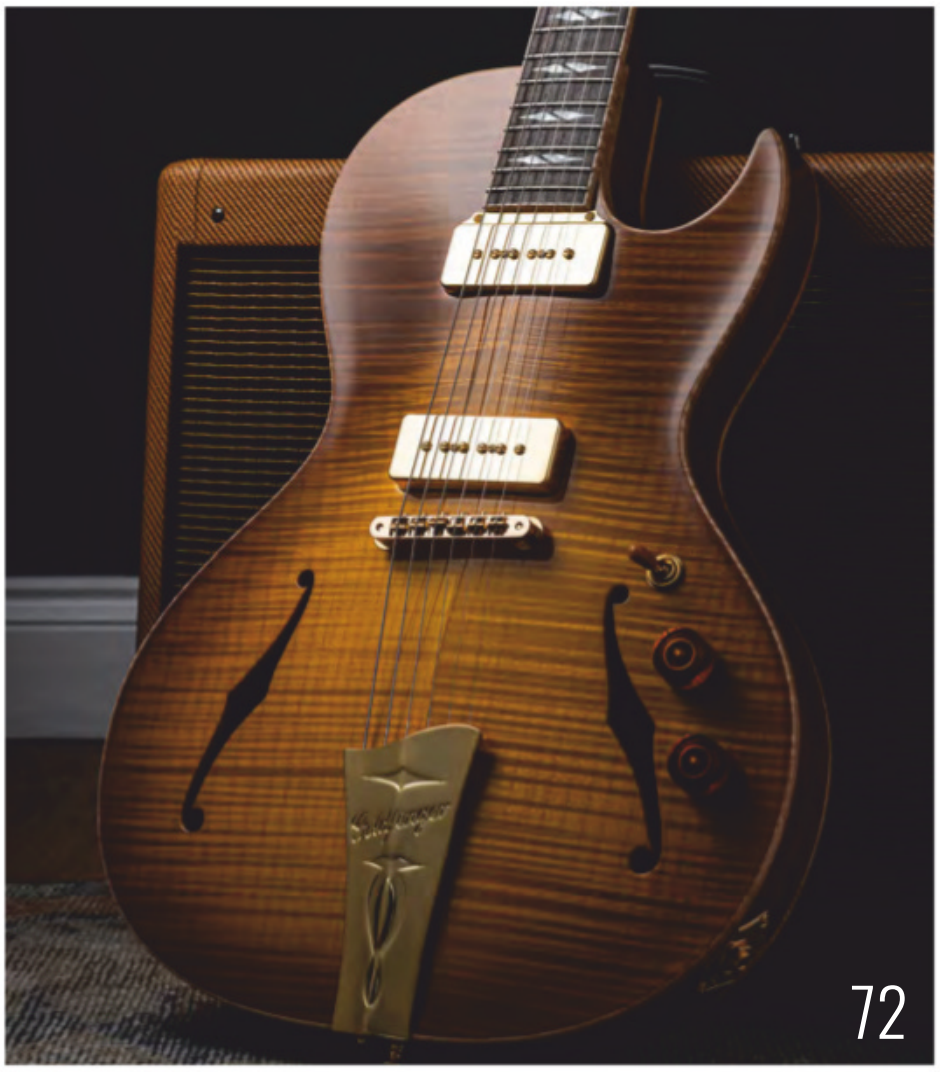
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EDITOR'S LETTER

GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

This month, we begin on a sombre note. The guitar community has lost far too many luminaries of late, including classical guitar icon Julian Bream, UFO bassist Pete Way, luthier Chris Eccleshall, the legendary Trini Lopez and, of course, Peter Green. Our extensive tribute to Green – a towering figure in electric guitar history, with perhaps the most emotive and expressive playing style of all the great British blues players – begins on p22.

Unfortunately, publication schedules dictate that we are unable to delve deeper into the lives and influence of Julian Bream, Pete Way, Chris Eccleshall and Trini Lopez but, in Trini's case, it might have been very different. Back in January, we were in Palm Springs after the NAMM Show, all set to interview and photograph the International Latin Music Hall of Famer, but there was a mix-up over timings and he went out for dinner instead.

Although we planned to reconvene at a later date, sadly it wasn't to be. It would have been an honour to help tell Trini's story; it's an inspiring tale that's perhaps more important and resonant now than ever before. Born in Dallas to Mexican parents in 1937, Lopez went on to be signed by Frank Sinatra, have a hugely successful recording career, work with Gibson on not one but two signature models, and even appear on the silver screen in iconic 1967 war movie *The Dirty Dozen*. A documentary about Trini's life entitled *My Name Is Lopez* was completed shortly prior to his passing, and it's sure to be essential viewing for all music lovers.

It's impossible, of course, to mention Texan guitarists without Stevie Ray Vaughan entering the conversion. The 30th anniversary of SRV's untimely death was 27 August and, in celebration of his enduring legacy, we've teamed up with Peach Guitars on a special commemorative supplement that you'll find bundled with this very issue. I hope you enjoy it – see you next month and don't forget to visit *Guitar.com* for your daily fix of all things guitar.

Chris Vinnicombe
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FRETBUZZ

Your letters and observations on the world of guitar

Join the conversation Email us at editors@guitar.com

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QUALITY STREET

I enjoyed the article on Denmark Street in the September issue of *Guitar Magazine*. It brought back some happy memories. Three years ago, we got a cheap return train ticket from York to London and spent a fantastic day on Denmark Street. We visited Andy's, Wunjo Guitars and others, and were treated with so much respect and enthusiasm by all the guys in the stores we visited. I was ushered into the vintage areas and given so many beautiful classic guitars to try out without any pressure to buy. Everyone seemed interested in my musical life. I felt like a superstar.

The highlight of the day was my visit to Macari's, where young Mr Macari sat my wife and I down, made us a cup of tea and spent the next half hour telling us about the Colorsound Fuzz pedal his father developed. He showed us one of the original pedals and explained how many top players came in to try it in the 1960s.

I hope the area's new developers recognise just how iconic Denmark Street truly is to the world of music, and don't follow the lead of Liverpool City Council, who demolished the Cavern Club only to realise that they had an incredible area that would attract music fans from around the world.

Finally, a massive thanks to all the members of staff at the stores we visited for their kindness and interest shown to me. I promise to buy something next time!

DAVID JONES, VIA EMAIL

BUCKING THE TREND

Hi, Chris. I was reading through the July issue of *Guitar Magazine* and the interesting article on humbucking coils by Matt Blades. The humbucking technique dates back to the days of moving coil loudspeakers as used in pre-war radio receivers. I clearly remember getting old radios from jumble sales, the local dump and adverts in the local rag back in the 1960s and 1970s, and the speaker used was always an energised loudspeaker with an electromagnet, and not the permanent magnet as used in modern speakers. This magnet was energised from the power supply in the radio and the humbucking coil was fitted in series with the voice coil to buck the hum (ripple) being generated by the energised magnet and in some cases the radio receiver amplification circuitry itself.

Power supplies in old radios weren't great. Early filter capacitors were expensive and low in capacitance value, so power-supply hum entered the energising coil and the amplifying stages of the amplifier, and would be heard through the speaker if not humbucked.

I'm a semi-retired audio-electronics engineer and my first job back in 1975 was building valve Roost guitar amplifiers in Southend, Essex. One of my many retirement jobs has been to build two JTM45 clones using original Radiospares transformers and GEC KT66s. Also, as a bit of fun, I've restored a few oddball amplifiers, such as the forgotten Northcourt, and amps found in back page adverts in *Practical Wireless* back in the day. I have a few other old valve amplifiers – by Watkins Electric Music, Vox and Roost, etc – in the workshop, which I've restored or intend to restore, and I intend to write about them too. Thanks for a great mag. It's nice for an old timer to see that guitar is in safe young hands!

TERRY BATEMAN, VIA EMAIL

LOVE ON THE ROCKS

Reading last month's issue, I came across Phil Bourne's vintage guitar collection. It was beautifully photographed as always, and he mentioned his early 1980s Love Rock. I have a 1980 Love Rock Goldtop, which is lovely guitar. How about an article on Love Rocks or Tokais? Maybe even a wider article on vintage Japanese guitars enjoyed by the likes of Ry Cooder?

RICH PARKER, VIA EMAIL

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ONES TO WATCH

KIDSMOKE

WORDS SAM ROBERTS

With their songs appearing on *Black Mirror* and *Made In Chelsea* before their debut album had even been released, Kidsmoke are proving that there's plenty of life in guitar music yet

Echoing the stadium-ready sounds and dreamy moods of The War On Drugs and The Cure in equal measure, this experienced North Walian four-piece have stumbled upon a brand of glistening guitar-pop and well-honed heartlands rock that is packed with shimmering arpeggiated guitar melodies and lustrous, beautifully crafted rhythms and vocal hooks – all of which has them primed for big things.

By way of a bright-blue beginner's guitar and feeling like Harry Potter at the wand shop, Sophie Ballamy tells us how it all began, one huge Netflix sync at a time.

What inspired you to pick up a guitar?

"When I was about 13, a few of my friends at school were learning guitar and I just thought it was the coolest thing ever. My Dad is pretty handy on guitar too, but I'd somehow never known about that before. So when I mentioned to him that I'd like to learn, he dug out an old electric guitar that my uncle had built. That was it, I was hooked. I'm not sure what that guitar was or where it is now. All I know is that it was bright blue, and I immediately wanted to be Jimi Hendrix."

Tell us about your main guitar and pedal setup.

"I play a Fender Classic Series '50s Strat in two-tone sunburst. I got it second-hand. I didn't really like the look of it at first. But when I picked it up and had a play, it was a bit like that scene in Harry Potter where he first picks up his wand, and the wind starts blowing and his hair goes up in the air. Needless to say, it came home with me. I have a Pedaltrain Nano+ pedalboard, so I'm limited to about six at a time.

There's also a tuner, which has to go on the floor. There's always a risk of having pedals just for the sake of it, so I pick just a few that I can customise and get the most from. I'm a big fan of TC Electronic, as their Toneprint feature means you can create your own custom patches and load them into the pedal. I could spend hours playing around with those. My current signal chain is the TC Electronic Hall of Fame 2, the Mooer Mod Factory, the Marshall EH-1, the Echohead Delay, the TC Electronic Spark Booster Mini, the Boss SD-1 Super Overdrive, the TC Quintessence Harmony and the TC Polytune."

What do you sound like and what's interesting about your approach to playing guitar?
"I get occasional Johnny Marr comparisons, which I'm always over the moon about. But I'm not sure I'm quite in his league. I tend to play quite intricate, melodic guitar parts for Kidsmoke, so I think that's where that comes from. For me, it's important to put down what's right for the song. Whatever I end up playing, it's always carefully considered."

You recently released your debut album *A Vision In The Dark*. What were the influences behind it?
"There were a lot of different influences for this album but I think you can hear how much we love 1980s bands such as The Cure, Prefab Sprout, and The Smiths. There's a balance of light and dark that runs through a lot of our music, and you can definitely hear that in those bands. Vocally, we are all hugely influenced by The Beatles and The Beach Boys. They are the masters after all."

You also had a prolific 2019, with showcases at SXSW and your work used in Netflix's *Black Mirror* and on E4's *Made In Chelsea*. How was that?
"It definitely reassured us that there were people out there who wanted to listen to our music. You work so hard as a band to do what you do, so to get to play these amazing shows and have your tracks picked for syncs is an amazing feeling. Getting to travel and play gigs with your mates is the stuff we all dream about."

What song stands out most on *A Vision In The Dark*?
"For me, it's *The Bluest You*. We took a bit of a leap forward sonically with this track, and threw the kitchen sink at it in the studio. Sometimes that doesn't work but this track is everything I wanted it to be and more. The outro is a four-bar groove guitar part over a five-bar chord sequence, so you get this out-of-sync/circular-chase thing going on over all the textures. I also get to go a bit nuts on guitar at that point, which is always nice to do."

What's your most memorable gig and when can we see you play next?
"A couple of years ago, we were asked to play at Robert Smith's Meltdown festival, supporting The Joy Formidable. It was an honour to play that show and completely surreal to think that Robert Smith had actually listened to our music. Between the soundcheck and the show, my amp broke, and I had to go straight into the PA. But despite that few minutes of panic, we had an amazing time. Like all bands, we've had to cancel all our tour dates so far this year due to COVID-19. But we have plans to get back out on the road as soon as it's safe to do so."

Where do you see yourself in 10 years' time?
"Hopefully, we'll be a couple more albums in and playing some cool shows. We're in our element writing and working on songs, so there should be no shortage of material."

Tell us something interesting about yourself that has nothing to do with guitar.
"I played football for Wales up to under-19 level. I haven't played properly for years because I have hamstrings made of Weetabix but I still love it and can't wait to watch Wales' men's team win the Euros next year!"

***A Vision In The Dark* is out now on Libertino Records**

THE PLAYLIST

ALBUM SPOTLIGHT

CORY WONG
TRAIL SONGS: DUSK

INTERVIEW SAM ROBERTS

On *Trail Songs*, the Vulfpeck collaborator swaps his Stratocaster for an array of acoustics as he channels jazzy open tunings, duets with mandolin players and plays with South American instruments

Renowned for his elastic right hand and compressed Strat tone, funk virtuoso Cory Wong gave his beloved electrics some respite during the lockdown and worked on a long-planned acoustic record instead – or, rather, two. Essentially a double album, *Trail Songs: Dusk* and *Dawn* see Wong take up the acoustic with the same fun and fervour as on his full band and Vulfpeck work.

Recorded in isolation, Wong received stems and tracks via Dropbox, sent from the likes of Minneapolis and Hong Kong and everywhere in between. "I usually like to make my albums with all of the musicians in the same room because that way we can feed off of each other's energy and stay in a nice creative flow," he says. "I sent the demos and scores out to my friends so they could replace the demo parts. It was a magical thing to be able to bring people from around the world together to play music at a time when many of them felt isolated from any sense of community."

Finding solace from the rigours of touring and travelling in the works of Pat Metheny and Chris Thile, Wong also experimented with open tunings, and even a requinto he acquired in Peru. The result is two LPs that are fun, warm and a perfect antidote to these testing times. Here, Wong has kindly picked out his favourite guitar parts from *Trail Songs: Dusk* and its follow-up *Dawn*.

BLUEBIRD – DAWN

"This song was really fun, and full of challenges. The first challenge was to write a song in the key of B♭, with some lines and chord changes that can't be done with open strings. The second challenge was to play a guitar solo following a Chris Thile mandolin solo. Chris is an insane player because he's got so much technical command over the instrument but also such great musical ideas. The things he plays are magical and inspiring, so it was really fun to follow up his solo and do something that felt like a continuation of it."

RACE WITH THE RIVER – DAWN

"This one is fun because it uses open D tuning. I only use standard tuning on my electric albums but I love playing in open tunings. There's a lot of hammer-on and pull-off action on this track, which all leads to chord tones because of the tuning."

THE LIFE CYCLE OF A BUTTERFLY – DUSK

"This was recorded on my Taylor baritone acoustic. There were a few years where I wanted to be like Pat Metheny. I wanted to write like him. His album *One Quiet Night* is all music on solo baritone acoustic guitar but the unique thing about it is that strings three and four are tuned up an octave. I tried it and realised I could get chord voicings that would be impossible with standard tuning but also nearly impossible in other open tunings. This song has two parts to it. Each one of these cycles has the same right-hand picking pattern throughout the entire section but the left-hand chord shapes change to move the song along. It's a writing/playing technique I learnt from Ralph Towner."

WESTERN WINDS – DAWN

"I love playing duets but, even more so, I love playing duets with a rhythm section behind me. Sierra Hull is one of my favourite musicians right now. Her timing and rhythm is so good, and her lines are really fluid. We have some mutual friends, so I messaged her on Instagram to ask if she wanted to collaborate. This was another experiment of mine to see if I could make something that grooves as hard as my other music but on acoustic instruments."

FIRST TIME I SAW THE MILKY WAY – DUSK

"This is another song using an open tuning. I used DADGAD and then put a capo on the first fret, so it ends up E♭. I overdubbed myself several times for this song. I used my Martin GPC 18-E for the main acoustic part. The intro melody is on a requinto, which is a 10-string instrument I got while travelling in Peru. The requinto is basically tuned to an open G but strings one and two each have three strings at the same pitch. It's a really interesting sound. When the song kicks in, I switch over to a 12-string guitar, which ends up sounding kind of like a hybrid of the main acoustic guitar and the requinto. Other parts orchestrate in and out of the song to bring melodies from the beginning back around."

***Trail Songs: Dusk* and *Dawn* are out now**

This month's essential tracks for guitar lovers

KATY J PEARSON
Fix Me Up

Released to coincide with the announcement of her debut album *Return*, Pearson's new single *Fix Me Up* opens with a sprightly Telecaster tone and her exquisite vocals. From here, it transforms into an Americana belter that will perk up even the rainiest of late summer days.

IDLES
Model Village

Another unsurprisingly rousing single from Bristol's premier proto-punk band, *Model Village* echoes the style heard on *Great* from 2018 LP *Joy As An Act of Resistance*. Brazen guitars and aggro vocals bend into an anthemic chorus that calls out small-town rhetoric and animosity.

THURSTON MOORE
Another Day

Part of his ongoing series of 20 Galaxie 500 covers to celebrate the forthcoming Record Store Day reissue of the American alt-rock heroes' live LP C*openhagen*, Moore's latest offering is a stripped-back acoustic version of the dream-pop anthem *Another Day*. It's a stark contrast to the original.

WILLIE J HEALEY
Big Nothing

Taken from his well-received sophomore record *Twin Heavy*, here Healey offers up a cool collision of 1970s psychedelia and 1990s hedonism, with sweet arpeggiated guitars and woozy slide melodies with Midlands-inspired guitar solos. We may be listening to a future guitar hero here.

ELVIS COSTELLO
We Are All Cowards Now

Coinciding with the announcement of his new LP *Hey Clockface*, Costello's new single was cut live on the studio floor, and the whole record recorded in just two days. Almost psychedelic in its delivery, the tune is laced with choppy, delayed guitars and falsetto vocals.

BLACK STONE CHERRY
Again

Self-produced and tracked at bass player Jon Lawhon's studio, *Again* sees the Southern-rock troubadours return to the heavier, roots-influenced verve of their debut. It was recorded with urgency before the lockdown was imposed – and you can hear it in the sharp riffery and fuzzy leads.

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN
The Rising

Written in the wake of September 11, this track was given fresh relevance thanks to a Democratic National Convention video created by The Boss. It features frontline workers, empty streets and Black Lives Matter protests, and calls for unity as the US heads towards its next presidential election.

FLEETWOOD MAC
Albatross

Surely one of the best and most captivating instrumental guitar recordings ever made. What better way to remember one of the true greats of our instrument, then, than by giving *Albatross* a spin one more time and ruminating on the singular genius of Peter Green.

OSCAR JEROME
Timeless

Touted as the UK's next jazz prodigy due to his work with Kokoroko, Oscar Jerome's debut solo album *Breathe Deep* has only added to that hype. This track, replete with beautiful solo jazz guitar and esoteric percussion, also features Lianne La Havas's signature vocals.

ROLLING STONES
Scarlet

Part of the reissue package for *Goat's Head Soup*, this lost gem features none other than Jimmy Page on guitar. Recorded in 1974 at Ronnie Wood's house, it also features Blind Faith's Rick Grech on bass. Hearing Page and Richards blend their disparate styles in their pomp is a real joy.

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INTRODUCING

Guitar.com Live

The teams behind *Guitar.com* and *Guitar Magazine* have come together to create a brand-new virtual guitar show this October that will feature your favourite artists, industry heroes and the best guitar brands, all packed into one epic VR space – and it's all free

We don't need to tell you that the world has changed dramatically in 2020. With it, so has our attitude to things that seemed totally normal back in January, such as mass gatherings, international travel, even shaking hands.

But changing worlds also present opportunities to try new and exciting things. With the big global guitar expos cancelling their in-person events as a result of the pandemic, *Guitar.com* has decided to do just that.

Guitar.com Live is a guitar show the likes of which you've never seen before, inviting you to enjoy the latest virtual-reality experiences, the hottest new gear from the biggest names in guitar, interviews and panels with industry luminaries, and performances and clinics from some of the best guitarists on the planet – all from the comfort of your own home.

The three-day event, held online from 2 to 4 October 2020, will provide a platform for brands and products to come alive, and connect makers, players and fans under one virtual roof created by the finest animators, designers and photographers. We're doing everything we can to bring the guitar world together at a time when it's harder than ever for us to do so in person.

In addition to launch partners PRS Guitars, Taylor Guitars, Ernie Ball Music Man and Mono, many more participating brands and artists are soon to be announced. The best part? Entry to Guitar.com Live is completely free. If you've ever dreamed of attending one of the big trade shows but haven't been able to, this is your chance to wander the booths, check out all the latest gear launches, listen to the talks and clinics from the industry's leading lights, and generally immerse yourself in the world of guitar for three whole days.

Chris Vinnicombe, chief editor of *Guitar.com*, says: "Audiences can expect to experience a series of incredibly immersive virtual spaces, as well as see the latest gear, hear breaking news first-hand and get up close (virtually) to their heroes.

WHAT TO EXPECT

Guitar.com Live will feature an impressive line-up of artists, gear brands and industry thought-leaders via three virtual spaces housed on the Guitar.com Live Hub

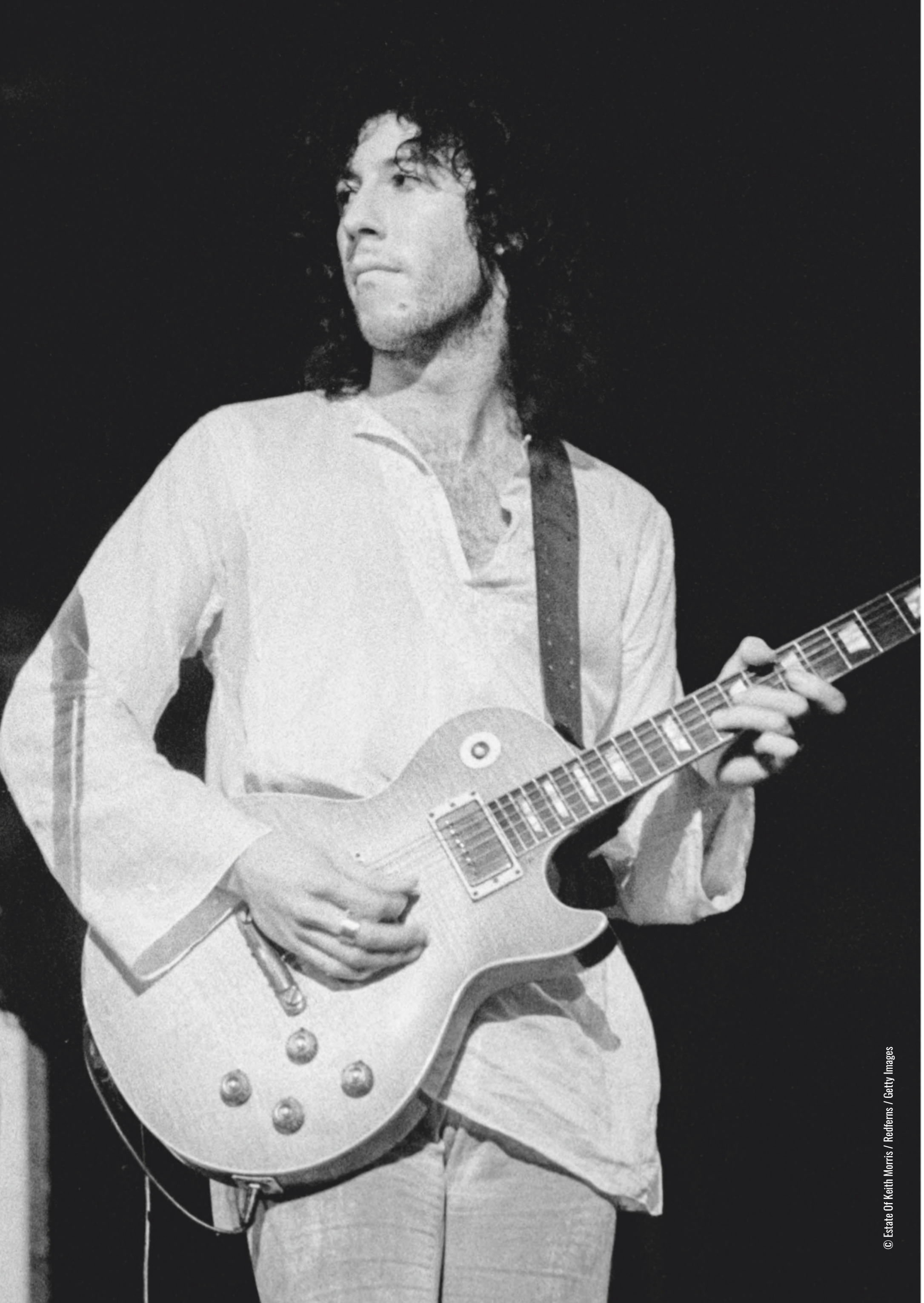
- **The Main Stage will feature artist performances, masterclasses and video podcasts**
- **The Lounge will host industry discussions, gear reviews and interviews**
- **The Showcase will be where leading guitar brands launch products and host Q&As in a bespoke virtual showroom**

It's also perfectly timed for guitar players to figure out what new gear they might want to get – and give – this holiday season."

For more on Guitar.com Live and to get regular email updates on programming, participating brands and artists, exclusive competitions and more in the lead-up to the event, register at the link below. Those who pre-register early will also be in the running to win a year's free subscription to *Guitar Magazine*. See you in October.

To register, visit guitar.com/live

Launch partners include PRS, Taylor Guitars, and Ernie Ball Music Man, with many more to be announced



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PETER GREEN

1946–2020

WORDS MICHAEL LEONARD

Supposedly destroyed by an LSD trip and subsequent electric-shock therapy, Peter Green – who sadly died aged 73 on 25 July 2020 – may always be characterised as a rock 'n' roll casualty. But what cannot be tarnished is his legacy of simply beautiful guitar playing and visionary songwriting. In the canon of legendary 1960s British musicians, Green's music sits proudly alongside the best.

Like most of his post-war generation, Bethnal Green-born Peter Greenbaum was fired up by skiffle and rock 'n' roll, though his early bands, which included The Muskrats and The Tridents, never took off. Indeed, although Green had learnt to play guitar as a teen, in The Tridents he was 'merely' a bassist. But in the mid-1960s London clubs, he was soon seduced by the sonic sting of another youth, 18 months his senior.

"I decided to go back on lead guitar after seeing Eric Clapton," Green later remembered. "I'd seen him with the Bluesbreakers before he considered singing and his whole concentration was on his guitar – he had a Telecaster – and it was really impressive. And he had a Les Paul. His fingers were marvellous. It took everything away from me, like my birthday, Christmas; you forgot everything… just listen to *this*."

Thanks to a friend, Nick Maynard, Green was soon swimming in blues. "The bloke laid some albums on me. A John Lee Hooker album, *Blues Volume 2*, with Otis Rush on it, Sonny Rhodes, a couple of other albums, like a folk festival of the blues with Buddy Guy, Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters, Willy Dixon and Sonny Boy Williamson on. One of the best albums you're ever going to get hold of, if not the best."

It was apt, perhaps, that Green superseded Clapton when the latter left John Mayall's Bluesbreakers to form Cream, even if replacing 'God' was always going to be quite some task for the fatherly Mayall.

Decca's blues aficionado and producer Mike Vernon recalled of his next booked session with John Mayall in late '66, "I noticed an amplifier which I never saw before so I said, 'Where's Eric Clapton?' Mayall answered, 'He's not with us any more, he left us a few weeks ago. Don't worry, we got someone better…' Then he introduced me to Peter Green."

Green was still just 20 and made only a few 45s and one album with Mayall – *A Hard Road*, in '67 – but his year-long stay made his name. On the LP, he sang on his own *The Same Way* but *The Supernatural*, a Latin-flavoured instrumental in D minor, saw Green using thick, reverb-heavy sustain that signposted the supple phrasing and tones on Fleetwood Mac's *Albatross* and *Black Magic Woman*. His cover of Freddie King's *The Stumble* was as masterful as EC's own King cover, *Hideaway*, on the better-known Beano Album.

Green was assured but never self-serving: it was the reason he named his own band, Fleetwood Mac, after his rhythm section. Recruiting slide specialist Jeremy Spencer (and, later, third lead player Danny Kirwan), Mac were soon going stratospheric: their self-titled blues debut LP – a top-five in 1968 – was followed by *Mr Wonderful* and *Then Play On*, in 1969. And with the likes of *Oh Well (Part 1 & 2)*, *Man Of The World* and *The Green Manalishi (With The Two Prong Crown)*, Green had soon broken free of the blues template. It was one of the reasons he was admired on so many levels.

Joe Perry told *Guitar.com*, "I'd never seen The Yardbirds or The Beatles… so I went to see Fleetwood Mac many times. I learnt a lot about blues guitar from Fleetwood Mac. Peter Green's style and sound made a big impression on me." Noel Gallagher liked Green "more for his songwriting" but admitted he was "still, without question, the best British blues guitar player ever".

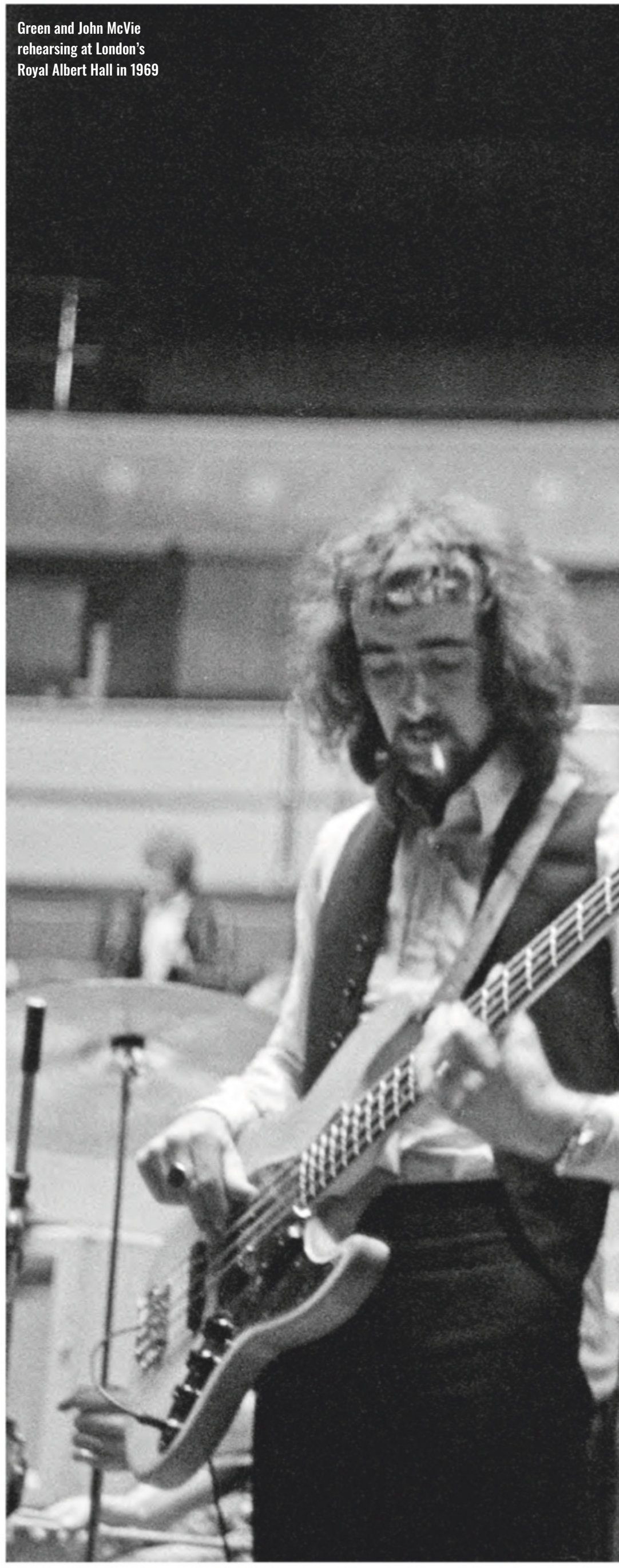
Drummer Mick Fleetwood knew that Mac were going to struggle to keep up with Green's ideas: "*Then Play On* was as far as he could go. It was the first of the Brian Wilson-side of Peter Green." Mac roadie Dennis Keane concurs, saying, "Peter wanted to be a total musician, not just a blues player. You'd go round to his gaff and he'd playing all kinds of music, from classical to jazz to African bongo stuff. It killed Peter that [the folky] *Oh Well Part 2* was never performed live. He thought that was the best part."

Bad trip or not, Green was perhaps never destined to have a long outpouring of creativity. When he found himself with nothing more to say or no way to convey his emotion, he simply stopped. As he noted in 1983, "I'm not in Fleetwood Mac… and I didn't want to be in it, particularly."

Green's wilderness years were punctuated with the occasional recording and various sightings, sometimes of dubious accuracy. Here was Green living in a squat; another time Green was 'spotted' with foot-long fingernails; and, the most bizarre, an East Anglian farmer known locally as the Egg and Potato Man even tried to convince fans that *he* was Peter Green.

When the real Green re-emerged healthier in the 1990s with The Splinter Group, his recordings were more perfunctory rather than inspiring, yet his many admirers were simply delighted to see him playing live again, and he recorded *The Robert Johnson Songbook* album six years before Eric Clapton delivered his similar *Me And Mr Johnson* project. But the Les Paul was long gone, and Green never wanted it back. He instead tended to play a Gibson Howard Roberts Fusion jazzer and Fender Strats. The truth is, that fabled Green blues sound is all in those early FM recordings.

He'd notably played a Strat on *Albatross* but Green's 1959 Les Paul – known as the Greeny Les Paul – is perhaps the most legendary of all 1959 sunbursts. Post-Fleetwood Mac, Green famously sold it to Gary



Green and John McVie rehearsing at London's Royal Albert Hall in 1969

© Michael Putland / Getty Images

Back onstage at the Royal Albert Hall in 2004

© Jo Hale / Getty Images

Moore and the late Northern Irishman made the most of it. Yet even Moore's tribute album, 1995's *Blues For Greeny*, simply highlights how there was much more to Green's timbre than the hardware he was using. That being said, if you're taking notes, Green used a Marshall head in the days of *The Supernatural*; around *Albatross*, a Fender Twin. In later Mac days, he favoured an Orange Matamp. He had pedals too, a Cry Baby wah and a Colorsound distortion, but rarely used them. Reverb was Green's thing. As roadie Dennis Keane recalled, "he could make a note distort just by over-plucking it. Total control".

Back in February, Mick Fleetwood & Friends played the Tribute To Peter Green show: Billy Gibbons, David Gilmour, John Mayall, Christine McVie, Steven Tyler, Noel Gallagher, Pete Townshend, Metallica's Kirk Hammett – currently the proud owner of the Greeny Les Paul – and more all played in homage. Green himself wasn't interested in taking a bow: he was round at his friend Bernie Marsden's having tea.

Green may forever be remembered as a victim of music's excess but it's best not to dwell on the cost of his muse but rather its value – and that will forever be priceless. **G**

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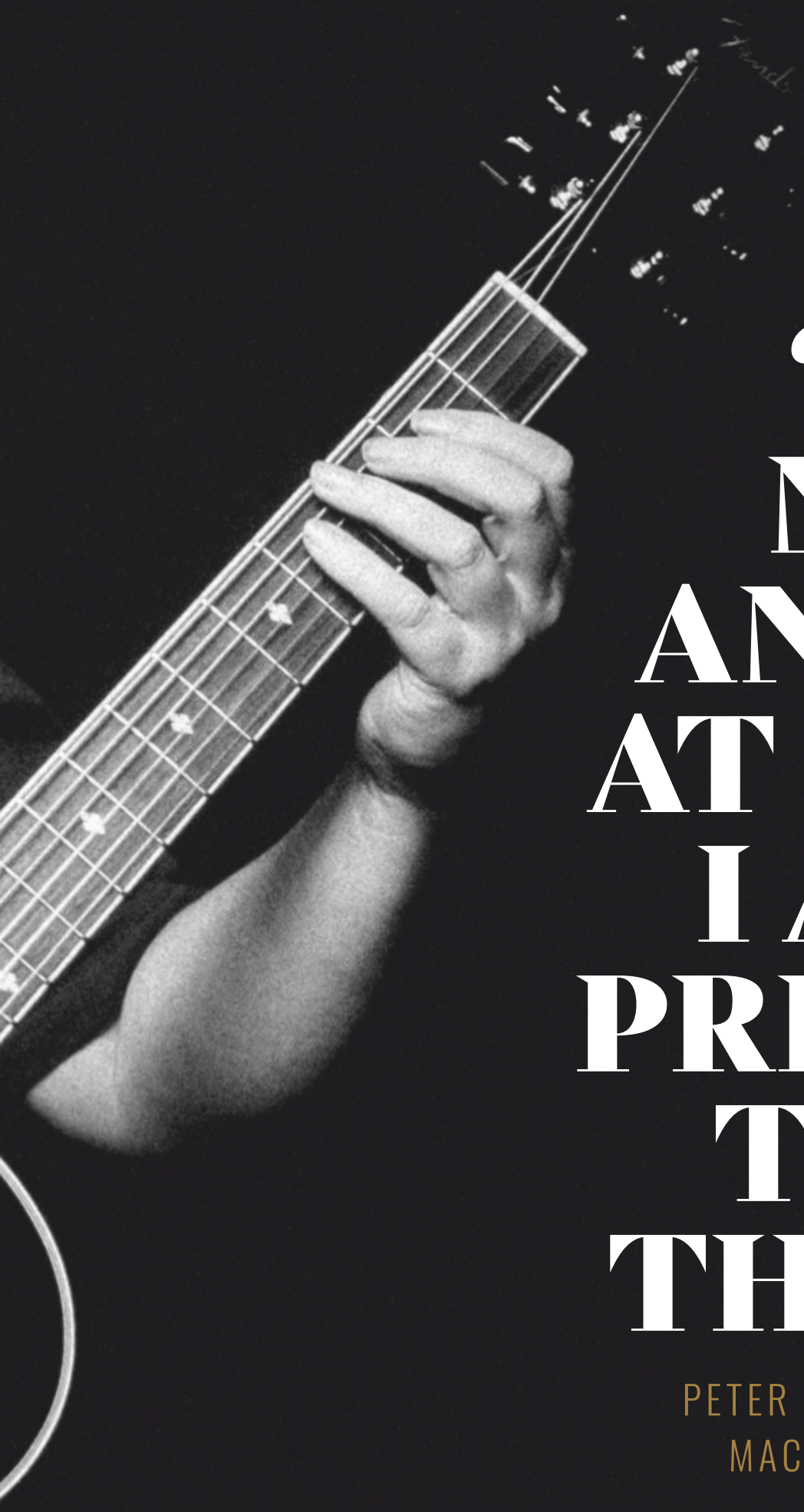

“I WAS NEVER ANY GOOD AT CHORDS. I ALWAYS PREFERRED TO PLAY THE TUNE”

PETER GREEN ON GUITAR, FLEETWOOD MAC, THE YARDBIRDS AND MORE

Back in 2007, little more than a decade after the legendary guitarist had returned to music following a long absence, Peter Green granted *Guitar Magazine* a rare interview. Over the course of the discussion, the guitarist would reflect on his wilderness years, Fleetwood Mac, and ’59 Les Pauls, plus his undying love of the blues

WORDS JULIAN PIPER

© Michael Putland / Getty Images

"I've only recently begun to understand what blues is really all about. I used to think that it was all about cotton fields and country blues. I was always fluffing around with stuff that I didn't really understand. I couldn't latch onto it all at first."

Peter Green is sitting quietly in the corner of a hotel bar in the shadow of Tower Bridge. If you've met Peter over the past decade, when hearing him talking today – sharing anecdotes and confidently reminiscing about his musical life – you'll notice a sharp contrast between this relaxed and lucid character and the noticeably introverted man you'd have encountered just over a decade ago at the time of his re-emergence in 1996 with the Splinter Group. Slightly portly and with only a frizz of white curls that hint at his long-haired glory days, Peter has the air of a kindly, benevolent uncle.

It's hard to reconcile this unassuming person with the legendary guitarist who led such an astonishing career as part of Fleetwood Mac. A mere two years after forming in the summer of 1967, the band was shifting more records than both The Beatles and The Rolling Stones combined. Equally remarkable was the way that a hard-nosed blues outfit featuring an Elmore James aficionado was able to transform into Fleetwood Mac the world-straddling pop stars, producing hit singles such as *Albatross*, *Oh Well* and *Black Magic Woman*. But then, for Peter Green, it all went wrong.

Maybe it's the passage of time – after all, it's been almost 40 years – but now the guitarist has no problem reflecting on his darkest days. "I know that after I had taken LSD, I was out of communiqué for a long time," he says. "But it wasn't hard to be the way I was. I was ready to do it. I was worried about what I felt was this privileged position I had as a musician, and I didn't like what was expected of me.

"If people asked me to play them something, I'd just say, 'No'. They'd say, 'Get your hair cut' or 'Cut your fingernails' and I'd just refuse. I suppose I was like a beatnik – but I liked the way I was. I liked having my fingernails long, even if I couldn't play guitar; I didn't need to play. I didn't want to even think of myself as a musician."

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> "I WAS QUITE NERVOUS STEPPING INTO ERIC'S SHOES. I WORRIED THAT THE BAND PLAYED TOO POWERFULLY FOR ME OR PERHAPS THAT JOHN WOULDN'T LIKE ME"

BUTCHER BLOCKED

Peter Green's initial guitar inspiration was his older brother Len, the first member of the Green family to get a guitar. For Peter, Len's informal lessons were a welcome escape from his day job as an apprentice to a butcher in Putney.

"He taught me a bit but I was never any good at chords," says Green. "I always preferred to play the tune. I used to like Hank Marvin's finer work, and my brother Michael and I learnt to play *Apache*, only he would play the chords while I always picked out the tune.

"I didn't really want to play blues at first but I used to go and listen to The Yardbirds at places like the Crawdaddy Club and the Marquee Club on Wardour Street, which made me want to give up the bass and try and get that Eric Clapton style on guitar.

"I used to love watching Paul Samwell Smith, the Yardbirds' bass player. He interested me because he looked a bit like a university teacher and always used to do this doubling-up thing at the end of numbers to bring them to a climax. I was intrigued by everything about them. They seemed to attract a college crowd; sometimes they were a bit ragged but it was a fabulous show.

"I'd seen the Stones in Richmond but The Yardbirds were very different. They were all very clean, their guitars were new and their hair looked good, whereas The Rolling Stones always seemed to be dirty and dusty. Their music wasn't that clever technically, I suppose, but for me it was a new high, a climactic thing that really seemed to be going somewhere.'

At the time, Peter owned a Harmony Meteor semi-acoustic given to him by the guitarist in one of his early bands. "It was a beautiful guitar," he remembers, fondly. At one point, Green had actually converted the Harmony into a four-string bass but, inspired by Clapton's playing, he once again replaced the nut and bridge to return the guitar to six-string form. Clapton was only 18 months older than Green but, musically and professionally, was already on another level. Legend has it that Peter would regularly grab the obliging Eric Clapton after Yardbirds gigs and absorb playing tips from him.

Equipped with his trusty Harmony, Green then joined Peter B's Looners, an instrumental outfit led by organist Peter Bardens. Soon, Green was playing legendary mod hangouts such as the Flamingo Club on Wardour Street and the Ram Jam Club in Brixton. The experience was no doubt valuable. More fatefully, however, was that the Looners' personnel also included a lanky drummer, one Mick Fleetwood.

BIRDS OF A FEATHER

In March 1965, The Yardbirds released *For Your Love*. Disheartened by the band's sudden commercialism, Clapton abruptly left to play with John Mayall's Bluesbreakers. Some 40 years on, Green is hazy about the precise sequence of events but what is certain is that, along with many others inspired by Clapton's virtuoso playing, he too quickly became a Bluesbreakers fan. Crucially for Green, Clapton wouldn't stick around with the Bluesbreakers either.

"I never made a conscious decision to play blues guitar but I'd seen Clapton playing with John Mayall so much," says Green. "Peter B's Looners used to support John Mayall at the Flamingo Club. When I found out Eric was going to Greece [in the summer of 1965, when he left to perform with The Glands],

I went to the Zodiac Club in Putney where I lived to try and get an audition. They had someone called Jeff Kribbetts playing guitar and, although I didn't necessarily think that I could do a better job than him, I just wanted to have a go! He was doing these little blues phrases like the riff on *My Babe*, and I thought, 'I can't do that'. But I also noticed that he had big fingers and that encouraged me.'

Green eventually buttonholed John Mayall during the interval of a Bluesbreakers gig in August 1965. Mayall remembers it well. "Peter got up from the audience and came up to me angling for the job, saying, 'Let me play. I'm better than he is,'" says John, with a laugh. "He kept doing this, each time becoming a bit more forceful, and because I was open to hearing anyone, I gave him a shot at it."

Green recalls the meeting differently. "John wouldn't let me play that day but I was persistent," he says, "and eventually I answered his advert in *Melody Maker*, which said that he wanted a guitarist of Buddy Guy or Otis Rush calibre. I went to his house in Lee Green and we had a little audition. He said, 'You're the best I've heard since Eric,' which was good because I was pushing the hell out of the strings trying to sound like him! I was a tremolo-arm kid. I'd never had a guitar with one but I was trying to get that same bendy effect.

"I was quite nervous stepping into Eric's shoes. I worried that the band played too powerfully for me or perhaps that John wouldn't like me. But I ended up doing two or three gigs with John – Newcastle, the Mojo in Sheffield, and I think Klooks Kleek in Hampstead – before Eric came back."

UNBREAKING BLUES

Clapton's quick and unexpected return from his Greek odyssey in November 1965 understandably left Green bitterly disappointed – but revenge would be sweet. In June 1966, frustrated by the limitations of the Bluesbreakers, the mercurial Clapton left to form Cream. To Green's delight, this time the tables were turned and he found himself being courted by an eager Mayall.

Determined to match Clapton's sound, Green bought himself a sunburst 1959 Gibson Les Paul and a 50-watt Marshall amplifier with a single 4x12" cabinet. His return to the band brought an immediate change in the Bluesbreakers sound. "The first time I used that guitar was when we playing Klooks Kleek," says Green. "John said, 'So that's your new weapon! You should do better with that.'"

Towards the end of his tenure with Mayall, Clapton had been increasingly stepping out of the traditional blues framework, with extended solos and the use of feedback. Green's approach was far more precise, and his carefully constructed solos harked back to the time he'd first practised Shadows tunes with his brother. Initially, the Clapton fans were angry at this new boy on the block who appeared to be usurping the man they called 'God'. Soon, though, they began to accept that Clapton had a more than worthy successor in Peter Green.

Producer Mike Vernon echoed this sentiment when the band turned up at Decca's West Hampstead studios to begin the recording of *A Hard Road*. "I was expecting Eric," says Vernon. "But from the moment Peter plugged in, I never had any doubts that he was going to be as good as Clapton within the Bluesbreakers framework. I think John already knew that Peter could play all the licks that Eric played, but he was going to do it his way – and his way was different."

The *Hard Road* LP turned out to be every bit as accomplished as Clapton's Mayall debut. Green supplied astonishingly eerie guitar on the now-iconic *The Supernatural* and some brilliantly biting licks on his reading of Freddie King's *Stumble* and *Someday After A While You'll Be Sorry*. Even more surprising, though, were his vocals on *You Don't Love Me*. Unlike Clapton, whose singing on the previous Bluesbreakers album was diffident, Green sang with real authority and conviction.

"I DIDN'T EVER WANT TO BE A FRONTMAN. ALL I WANTED WAS TO BE A SIDEMAN LIKE BUDDY GUY WHEN HE WORKED WITH JUNIOR WELLS. I DIDN'T WANT TO DO VOCALS AT ALL. IT JUST CAME ALONG BY ACCIDENT"

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© George Wilkes / Hulton Archive / Getty Images

"I didn't ever want to be a frontman, though," says Peter, with a rueful smile. "All I wanted was to be a sideman like Buddy Guy when he worked with Junior Wells. I didn't want to do vocals at all. It just came along by accident."

STEPPING OUT

The reason Green left the Bluesbreakers in June 1967, only a year after joining, remains a mystery. It wasn't a personality clash: by this time John McVie and Mick Fleetwood were both in the band and had become firm friends with Peter. He also got on well with Mayall. But when Mayall thoughtfully awarded Green some studio time as a birthday present, he wheeled McVie and Fleetwood into the studio to record some tracks as a three-piece. It may be that Peter was irritated by the use of a brass section on *A Hard Road*, a move that to some die-hard blues fans signalled a capitulation to the evils of jazz.

Whatever the truth was, by the time Peter Green left the Bluesbreakers, Mick Fleetwood had already been sacked anyway.

"He came around to see me and we got Fleetwood Mac together," Mick later reminisced. "We had no manager so we did everything ourselves – got the van and equipment sorted out. Mike Vernon suggested we get Jeremy Spencer, who was playing in a Birmingham blues band called the Levi Set. We went up to see him, asked him to join and went straight into rehearsing for the Windsor Jazz and Blues Festival with Bob Brunning on bass."

The band's first album, *Peter Green's Fleetwood Mac*, was released soon afterwards, and with the double whammy of Peter and Jeremy Spencer sharing the spotlight, the group quickly became a popular club act. But from the beginning, Spencer's anarchic approach to slide guitar was always at odds with Peter's more structured approach to songwriting.

ABOVE Green performing with 'Greeny', his '59 Les Paul Standard, in London

FACING PAGE Peter Green's Fleetwood Mac in 1968. From left: Mick Fleetwood, Jeremy Spencer, Green, Danny Kirwan, John McVie

ABOVE Peter Green playing a Telecaster at Charlbury's Cornbury Festival, 2009, at the time his first UK appearance in four years

ABOVE RIGHT Fleetwood Mac rehearsing at London's Royal Albert Hall, 1969

RIGHT Green's legendary '59 Gibson Les Paul Standard is now in the possession of Metallica's Kirk Hammett

"He couldn't play my tunes, so it was disheartening in a way," says Peter. "When he joined, we used to share the singing, half and half. But because he couldn't play on my songs, I only had bass and drums behind me. It was a bit empty."

The solution was not to dispense with Spencer's services – his onstage antics and sense of fun served as a perfect antidote to Peter's more studied approach – but to recruit a third guitarist. Danny Kirwan played for a London band that had supported Fleetwood Mac before. "It was Mick's idea to get Danny in the band," says Green. "He was playing a Watkins Rapier in this band Boilerhouse, and he just sounded so good. He was a terrific player.'

Introducing a third guitarist wasn't as much of an issue as you might expect. There were no messy overlapping licks here. In fact, it wasn't really a problem at all. "We never played all at once," says Green. "Jeremy Spencer used to toddle off and leave us to it, which is why we had Danny Kirwan. At the beginning he was supposed to play piano – like Skip James, he thought – but he never did."

Black Magic Woman was released early in 1968 and nudged the bottom of the Top 50, giving the band their first taste of pop fame. However, no-one – least of all Green – was prepared for the runaway success of the band's next foray into the singles chart. In October that year, the band recorded *Albatross*, a wistful laid-back instrumental that echoed Santo & Johnny's classic steel-guitar showcase *Sleepwalk* and, once again, showed off Peter's love of pure melody.

"Jeremy didn't play on that record," notes Green. "I double-tracked the bass and did the slide guitar as well, playing a Stratocaster flat on my lap. When we did the video, Jeremy faked the slide part. In fact, I used a Hawaiian third string on my Les Paul as an aid for vibrato; it sounds like a Hawaiian guitar when the player's left his slide at home! I bought it because that was the only string the shop had that was the right gauge."

More hits followed *Albatross*, including *Need Your Love So Bad*, *Man Of The World*, *Oh Well*, and *The Green Manalishi (With The Two Prong Crown)*. Not all of them, inevitably, were as Peter would've preferred:

"I never really intended *Oh Well* to have the first section," he complains. "I just wanted it to be the classical second side. I took the idea for the lyrics from that old blues song by Muddy Waters – 'If I was a catfish… [*Rollin' Stone (Catfish Blues)*]'"

FINDING YOUR FEET

Less than two years later, Peter Green's Fleetwood Mac would be finished and the band's leader would spiral inexorably into a personal hell. His antipathy to touring and the trappings of success combined with a few too many acid trips left him paranoid and withdrawn. Though he had a few reunions with Fleetwood Mac in the early 1970s and pulled himself together by the end of the decade, producing a handful of albums that showed glimmers of his talent, it wasn't until 1997 that he truly re-emerged, making a series of albums with The Splinter Group, and releasing the all-acoustic *Robert Johnson Songbook* in 1998. The latter, perhaps, revealed most strongly that Green's mind was once more at ease with playing blues – something that he had always struggled to justify.

Green's love of the blues is reflected in his listening habits, as evidenced by the esoteric group of guitarists that he's currently enjoying.

"My favourite voice ever is this guy called Maxwell Street Jimmie, who was a busker on Maxwell Street in Chicago," says Green. "He played this demonic guitar and was a lovely, rough player. Some of his songs were tremendous but he only ever made a few records.

"Then there's Hop Wilson, a slide-guitar player from Houston, who used a twin-neck lap steel. He recorded a couple of singles under the name Pap Hop, and wrote the song *Black Cat Bone* [which was later covered by Robert Cray]. I love his album *Texas Steel Guitar Flash*. I'm also a great lover of gospel music at the moment, people like the Soul Stirrers, Pilgrim Travellers, and the Swan Silvertones.

"I've always loved harmonica players too. *Hoodoo Man Blues* by Junior Wells with Buddy Guy is another of my favourite albums. But I've also been listening to a harmonica player from Chicago called Tail Dragger. I like the way his music kind of chugs along. It doesn't ever build up to any sort of climax. He plays like he's in a small club where there's an audience that wants to talk and he's trying not to make too much noise. I've been listening to a lot of world music recently too, and I just bought this Vietnamese banjo that has only got two strings. I love the weird sound it makes!"

Vietnamese banjos aside, will we see Green playing live again? It's impossible to say. Currently he's spending time in Sweden, indulging his love of fishing on a lake near his girlfriend's house. "I feel good in myself," he says, "but, at the moment, I can't see myself going back to playing full time."

Peter also seems to have attained a humorously philosophical attitude to the money and management problems that caused him so much torment in the past, though his words do seem to echo the let's-give-it-all-away attitude that pervaded his split from Fleetwood Mac. "Once you have the record sales, you do have to accept the money – but my manager found a way around it by not paying me," says Green, with a chortle. "So maybe now all I need is a really good manager who won't give me any money!"

One final question before we go. Peter Green once said that, in his opinion, people can't really play the blues unless they'd actually experienced them. Does he still feel that way?

"Everyone gets the blues, rich or poor," he points out. "I've always known that to be born rich must give someone terrible blues – their whole life must feel as though it's a joke. When I was a kid, I used to think that the blues was just all about the boring sides of life, like school and work. I used to get the blues about having to do my homework!"

SIMON NEIL

WORDS HUW BAINES
PORTRAITS NEIL ANDERSON & KEVIN THOMSON

With new album *A Celebration Of Endings* demonstrating that Biffy Clyro can still bring visceral fun to the masses, we caught up with the frontman to talk Strats, stripping things back, his enduring love of the Boss Metal Zone, and why he needed to remind himself that he was in a "twisted rock band"

Biffy Clyro have always had one eye on the future. There's now – and there's what comes next. There's that restless creative buzzing in the back of Simon Neil's head. But this is different. "In 100 years, they're going to talk about 2020, the moment we all woke up," he says.

The Scottish rock giants' new album *A Celebration Of Endings* represents their two cents in a conversation that's altering the world before our eyes. Amid a global pandemic, as Black Lives Matter protests make their indelible mark, and as venal politicians flounder under the most basic scrutiny, it's a call for compassion, as well as accountability.

"I was thinking about how I wanted to step up as a human being," says Neil. "We're at such an important moment. You look at the world and think, 'How the fuck did we end up here?' But what I've realised is that asking that question isn't quite enough. You have to make a difference yourself. You have to change your behaviour, your outlook and your engagement with things."

On the LP's seismic first song *North Of No South*, Neil is unmoored, and he's using Biffy's music to help him figure out exactly where he stands. "Your north has gone out west," he yells. As an opening statement, it's extremely potent, blending its searching anti-authoritarian streak with a thunderous riff and the arena-ready anthemics that broke the band into the open almost 15 years ago with the release of *Puzzle*.

"When I was growing up, there were things you just believed," says Neil. "If someone with a certain position in society told you something, there would be an element of, 'They must be telling the truth'. But we're not in an era where we can assume that everyone is being honest or that they have the right reasons behind what they're doing.

"That song's about being somewhere you feel you don't belong – the foundations that you built everything on are starting to shake. But right now I'm more positive about the perspective of the songs. We *are* fuckin' making a change. I'm not just making my own personal changes. *We* are fuckin' changing. *We* are moving forward. We've found our true north, and our head isn't in your fuckin' mouth anymore."

ABOVE & OPPOSITE Simon during the live performance of new album, *A Celebration Of Endings*, which was streamed to fans across the world to celebrate the album's launch

"I HAD THE LOUDEST FUCKIN' AMPLIFIERS. YOU WOULDN'T BELIEVE IT. AT ONE POINT, IT GOT TO 121 DECIBELS AT MY MICROPHONE, WHICH IS THE VOLUME OF A JUMBO JET"

TRUE NORTH

Biffy's latest effort was written following a couple of career moves that cast the band – completed by twin brothers James and Ben Johnston on bass and drums, respectively – in markedly different roles. *Ellipsis*, their 2016 album, was a sonic exercise recorded with Rich Costey that took sandpaper to their rough edges.

The soundtrack to the film *Balance, Not Symmetry* followed in 2019, and allowed the trio to co-produce and reset by catering to the narrative beats of a script co-written by Neil. With Costey back in the saddle for *A Celebration Of Endings*, they forged ahead with a different idea of what a Biffy Clyro record should sound like in the here and now.

"*Balance, Not Symmetry* reminded me of who we are as a band," says Neil. "I'm dying for us to experiment all the time but there's also an essence that has to be there in every record – the quirkiness, the aggression. *Ellipsis* was deliberately a studio record. It wasn't meant to be abrasive at any point. But when I listen back, that's probably the characteristic of our band that I wish it had a bit more of.

"Going in with Rich again, it was about embracing his way of working but also reminding ourselves that we're a twisted rock band and we're going to experiment as a twisted rock band. Our identity was a bit closer to the surface. When you make a record with a producer for the first time, I'd describe it as like going on a date. Everyone's on their best behaviour. No-one wants to upset the other person. You're getting to know each other. The second date, maybe you're going in for the kiss and you can be a bit cheekier. That's how it felt. It felt like we knew what Rich could do and he knew what we could do."

TWISTED SISTERS

Let's revisit that 'twisted rock band' thing. We've heard all this before from major artists but, in this instance, Neil isn't simply ladling PR gravy over a milquetoast record from a comfortable festival headliner. Alongside the synth diversions, proggy orchestral interludes and pop-leaning melodies that have characterised latter-day Biffy records, *A Celebration Of Endings* is home to moments of searing heaviness and off-kilter riffage that can be traced back to their days as toilet-circuit heroes trading blood and sweat with acts such as Hundred Reasons, Hell Is For Heroes, ThisGirl and Jetplane Landing almost two decades ago.

“IT’S THE FIRST TIME I’VE EVER THOUGHT LESS IS MORE. THE STRAT IS ONE OF THE DEFINING SOUNDS OF OUR BAND. I’VE NOT BEEN AS AWARE OF IT AS I SHOULD HAVE BEEN. UNTIL I PUT A STRATOCASTER ON A SONG, IT’S NOT A FUCKIN’ BIFFY SONG”

“I’ll never get tired of quiet-loud,” says Neil. “Going from a whisper to a scream can be such a powerful thing. That whole era coming out of the late 1990s in the States influenced a lot of British bands. There was a real fearlessness. That is the foundation of who we are and I will never apologise for being a three-piece fuckin’ heavy rock band. People who aren’t into heavy music, they can’t understand what it’s like in those moments. There was an awful lot of respect among all those bands. Everyone was doing something exciting and new. It seemed like the possibilities were endless.

“I still see us as the same band. I was listening to [Dischord-signed post-hardcore band] Faraquet’s record the other day and I got fuckin’ goosebumps. I hadn’t listened to it in 15 years. That is my era of music. I still enjoy new music but I feel so honoured to have played with all those bands. It’s thanks to them that we got a lot of opportunities, like going on tour with Hundred Reasons. I’ll forever be grateful for that. It’s just a shame that not all those bands got the respect they deserved. There’s a lot of luck involved. Bands like Reuben could have been fuckin’ massive. I hope we’re doing them proud.”

ABOVE Simon remains utterly devoted to the Fender Strat, which he says "feels like part of my body"

STRAT'S ALL YOU NEED

Stitched across the surface of Biffy's discography in a similarly stubborn fashion is Neil's Stratocaster. It is as absurd today as it was 18 years ago that the squalling noise produced by the band comes from an instrument that hasn't always been associated with getting its hands dirty. "I just like pushing people's buttons, I guess," says Neil, with a laugh. "The Stratocaster, I swear to God, it feels like part of my body. It's just second nature. Whenever I put on another guitar, I feel like there's something missing in my connection."

An embryonic Biffy Clyro was kicking around between Ayr and Kilmarnock as early as the mid-1990s, with their attention-grabbing debut album *Blackened Sky* coming out on Beggars Banquet in 2002. They caught onto the twisting dynamics of American post-hardcore and the open-hearted indie-rock hooks of their countrymen in Idlewild, fashioning songs that could overwhelm with brutal distortion one moment and soar with a perfectly placed chorus the next. The presence of Neil's Strat was a conspicuous fuck-you to some early doubters that stuck around.

RIGHT Simon's current favourite Strat is a Custom Shop Michael Landau model, which he describes as, "the greatest fuckin' guitar I've ever put around my neck"

"The first guitar I ever bought was a Squier Strat," he remembers. "I fell in love with it. It's what I learnt to play Nirvana songs on, and what I wrote my first songs on. My knowledge of guitars at that point was so limited. Ben and James's dad had a 1988 Mexican Strat, and he loaned that to me for one of our very first shows, and he then gave it to me as a gift.

"We made our first three records with that guitar, and it just became this extension of who I am. At that point, if I could afford another amplifier, I'd just buy one and add it to the setup. I ended up being able to build this combination sound from a Strat that really had an awful lot of meat on the bone, a lot of body. Everyone who saw me with it said, 'You can't play a Strat in a three-piece,' and I was like, 'Well, I'll fuckin' show you.'"

Of late, Neil has turned some of that indignation inwards. "Over the years, I've ended up using six amplifiers to just get my guitar to work, and that started to scare me," he says. "It moved away from the reason I played the Strat."

While working on *A Celebration Of Endings*, he sought to disassemble his setup in pursuit of something straightforward and honest. The colossal riff to *North Of No South* barrels into the world as vindication of this approach. It sounds *huge*. "That's one Stratocaster, with one Vox amp cranked to fuck. I used a [JHS] pedal called The Kilt, which is dynamite," adds Neil.

"The main appeal of the Strat to me is the percussive side of it. As a three-piece, I didn't want to have big blocks of sound. I wanted it to be wiry and sound like another percussive instrument in the band. That informed my playing a lot. I used to play violin before I picked up the guitar, so I would always put my fingers in slightly weird positions. I always suited the feel of a Strat more than something that has a lot of bottom end. The guitar I've used for the past three records is a signature model for a guy called Michael Landau. It costs a small fortune but it is the greatest fuckin' guitar I've ever put around my neck.

"The main aim on this record was to get one amplifier, one microphone, one pedal, and one Stratocaster. When we could achieve that, it kind of blew my mind. As a player, it's the first time I've ever thought less is more. I'm still discovering new ways to make my Strat sing. It's one of the defining sounds of our band. I've not been as aware of it over the years as I should have been. Until I put a Stratocaster on a song, it's not a fuckin' Biffy song."

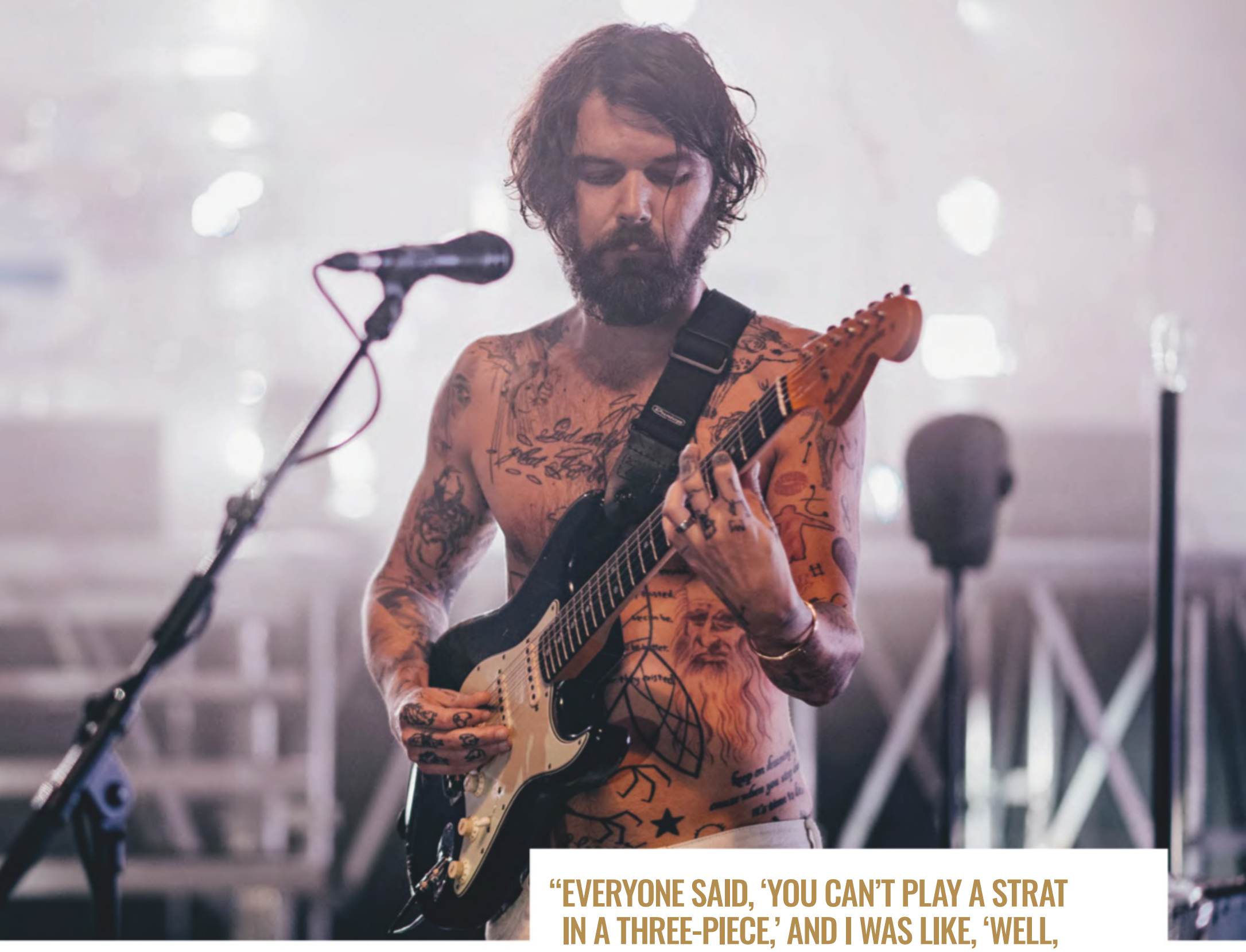
There have been times in the past, though, where Neil has branched out. Along with some Les Paul overdubs in the heavier moments on *A Celebration Of Endings*, he's maintained a relationship with Gretsch hollowbodies – among them a White Falcon and a G6120T – for many years. But these guitars must work to unseat his Strat, offering something sonically that his go-to cannot.

"For me, when we're playing live, it's always an audio thing where I'm thinking, 'This needs to be more lush and I don't need to worry about the physicality of this song,'" he says. "If it's a song where I'm expressing some sort of catharsis, the Strat is like my sword and shield at the same time. But what I've realised over the years is that the texture of a record is so important.

"Maybe a few years ago, every overdub would have been a Stratocaster. Now, I might try to layer it with a piano for a change, put some other guitars on there or a weird effect, just to fuck around with what you're listening to. It's about learning not to be afraid. Initially, I wanted to hear my Strat the whole way. Rich Costey definitely taught me how to find this middle ground."

ROAD HOGS

Neil also sees a sharp distinction between his studio work and the kit he used on the road, with the subtleties of a record eventually being funnelled through his desire to "stand on stage and be a fuckin' egomaniac". In recent years, he has turned to a Kemper Profiler to model sounds from the band's back catalogue but it must work in harness with a rig that rides that chaotic wave alongside him. Neil has been running multiple amps since he was a green kid seeking to obliterate the front row of clubs everywhere and, while the gear has changed, that remains his default mode.



> “EVERYONE SAID, ‘YOU CAN’T PLAY A STRAT IN A THREE-PIECE,’ AND I WAS LIKE, ‘WELL, I’LL FUCKIN’ SHOW YOU’”

“I had the loudest fuckin’ amplifiers. You wouldn’t believe it,” he says, laughing. “At one point, it got to 121 decibels at my microphone, which is the volume of a jumbo jet. In the past five years, I brought the Kemper in for consistency. I basically model all the songs from the album so I have that option live. In theory, the Kemper should work by itself but, with my style of playing, it really doesn’t. It’s so important to me that there’s air moving, that something is actually being driven on stage.”

These days, to borrow a phrase, Neil is seeking a sense of balance. “I have my Peavey [Delta Blues 1x15 combo], which runs off stage,” he adds. “What I’m operating with most of the time on stage is a monitor system that has a mix of my amplifiers. It used to be that wherever I was on stage the sound of my guitars would change too much. If I was standing on the right-hand side, my guitar would be really clean, and then I’d walk to the middle and it’d be really distorted. Since I’ve gone with in-ears, I’ve been trying to change that.

“In my new setup, I have a power amp running a cab by itself. I’ve also got an Audio Kitchen Big Trees preamp to drive – and it’s stunning. It’s got a wonderful sound. I’m still using my Boss Metal Zone pedal through a Marshall, and I have a monitor that combines the two. I’m trying to be more efficient, because my whole raison d’être is just ‘add more, make it louder, make it bigger’. In the past couple of years, I’ve discovered that I need to streamline it. I used a Black Volt on the record a lot. There’s a fella in California, just a wee workshop, and he makes these beautiful amplifiers and pedals. This amp is a work of art. It sounds like 19 fuckin’ 72.”

“I’m going for something more sophisticated,” Neil acknowledges. But nestled amid it is that pesky Boss Metal Zone. As with his Strat, it’s a survivor that has become indivisible from the Biffy sound. “I’ve had 10 years of people trying to get me to get rid of this fuckin’ Metal Zone,” he says. “I reset my rig just before lockdown and tried to get rid of it but every time my tech set up, I’d be like, ‘What’s that? It sounds amazing,’ and he’d say, ‘Your fuckin’ Metal Zone.’

“But I cannot get it to work in a studio setting. Live, that fuzz in a high frequency works. You’re looking for more subtlety in an album, not just that explosion. I’m lucky that I have [touring guitarist and one-time Oceansize man] Mike Vennart. He can recreate string sections and keyboards with his pedals. It puts me off going too far down the effects route when I’m playing live – he can do things I could only dream of. I can hear things in the studio and make it happen in there but, live, I’m less worried about being an architect and more worried about being a demolitions expert!”

A Celebration Of Endings is out now on Warner Records

THEORY & PRACTICE

Soccer Mommy, AKA Sophie Allison, has been in love with the guitar since the age of five and, in the two years since her debut album *Clean*, the Nashville-based guitarist has established herself as one of the most exciting new artists on the indie-rock scene. A few months on from the release of her superlative sophomore LP *Color Theory*, we caught up with the 23-year-old to talk Strats, alternate tunings, how she's already written most of her third album, and why the guitar will always be cool…

WORDS GARY WALKER **PORTRAITS** BRIAN ZIFF

"I want to see guitar in the mainstream, I don't ever want it to go away. I would love to see that happen." Sophie Allison, AKA Nashville solo artist Soccer Mommy, is reflecting on her desire to see the instrument she has been entwined with since the age of five become an enduring part of the pop zeitgeist.

If that admirable ambition comes to fruition, the 23-year-old, who was born in Switzerland and grew up in Tennessee, will have been as instrumental in that ascendency as anyone. Already two studio albums in and working on a third, Soccer Mommy's evocative grunge-pop combines the serrated edge of mid-1990s alt-rock role models such as Liz Phair, Sonic Youth and The Breeders with the pop sensibilities of Avril Lavigne and Taylor Swift. Her songs burst with heart-swelling melodicism, the lyricism unflinchingly direct and emotionally nuanced, the arrangements smartly honed.

It's emblematic of a modern landscape where archaic genre boundaries are being swept aside, and Allison and contemporaries such as Phoebe Bridgers, Lucy Dacus, Julien Baker, Sasami and Snail Mail are leading the charge. A Fender Next artist and owner of an enviably cool arsenal of Strats and offsets, Allison is one of a growing wave of players bending the guitar to contemporary ends – and inspiring more young women to follow suit.

"The guitar is great for pop music," says Allison over Skype during a day of interviews to promote her new Soccer Mommy And Friends Singles Series in aid of Oxfam's COVID-19 Relief Fund. "It can make something that's so summery, cool and just fun if you do it right. A lot of that comes from learning to experiment with things outside the basic chord structures and stuff you learn, and going into open tunings and making these cool-sounding progressions that have a really fun lightness.

"It's still a really cool instrument, and people who say the guitar is dead and synths are in or whatever, it's not true. The two things work amazingly together. It's not a case of one's out, the other's in."

Allison's own musical journey began when her parents bought her a toy guitar. "I'd play it all around the house," she says with a smile. "After a while of being obsessed with this thing, they got me a tunable children's acoustic guitar so I could start taking lessons. I never gave it up. I just loved it."

The fateful first Fender, a red Mini Strat, arrived when Allison was nine, and she has been an evangelist for the brand ever since.

"At that age, I had no idea who any guitar players were," she says. "I just loved Avril Lavigne and Hilary Duff, and wanted to make music that sounded like theirs with my guitar. I loved writing parts, separating chords and melodies, rather than technical playing.

© Gonzales Photo / Alamy Stock Photo

ABOVE Sophie Allison performing as Soccer Mommy with her Fender Jaguar at Copenhagen's Ideal Bar, 2018

I've always loved the tone of a Strat. They're extremely versatile and I like how light they are in comparison to a Jaguar or something like that."

Joining the Fender Next artist-development programme has not only helped sate Allison's appetite for the brand's guitars, it also has a more significant purpose. Fender last year published statistics that claim that 50 per cent of new guitar purchases are now made by women. In an industry that has been dominated by men for decades, it's perhaps not cause for high-fives just yet but a clear sign of long-overdue progress. Allison is pleased to be playing her part.

"That's really important to me," she says. "When I think about when I started playing guitar, if I'd started when I was 11 or 12, I don't know if I'd have been as confident and as eager. Being young gives you the confidence to try things out. People in their twenties or thirties, especially women, might not pick up the guitar. Confidence is a big issue and there's a lot of sexism, especially when you're young and learning to play. I experienced it too but I loved it so much that I really didn't care.

"It's really great that Fender is reaching out to so many women who play guitar and giving them the opportunity to encourage that in other people."

DRAIN YOU

Fender guitars have been intrinsically linked to the Soccer Mommy project since the start. Allison began by posting her songs and albums on Bandcamp in 2015 before her debut proper, *Clean*, arrived through Fat Possum in 2018.

Produced again by The War On Drugs engineer Gabe Wax, follow-up *Color Theory*, an absorbing examination of family, grief and Allison's own mental health, was a big stride forward. The record is divided into three colour moods: blue representing depression; yellow sickness; and grey darkness and loss, inspired by Allison's grappling with her mother's cancer.

On the affecting *Circle The Drain*, Allison sings, "I cling to the dark of my room, and the days thin me out. Or just burn me straight through". Across the album, that honesty is met with Allison's considered playing, which fizzes with melodic ideas, beatific clean tones and ambient textures that hint at a growing interest in soundscaping. How does she feel, with the benefit of distance, about that second record?

"I feel great about it," she says. "Even in comparison to *Clean*, my songwriting took a big step up and I got to explore so many production and instrumental ideas that I didn't on *Clean*. I'm very happy with it."

“PEOPLE IN THEIR TWENTIES OR THIRTIES, ESPECIALLY WOMEN, MIGHT NOT PICK UP THE GUITAR. CONFIDENCE IS A BIG ISSUE AND THERE’S A LOT OF SEXISM, ESPECIALLY WHEN YOU’RE YOUNG AND LEARNING TO PLAY”

"I WAS SCROLLING INSTAGRAM ONE DAY AND SAW A PURPLE SPARKLE NOVO. I CONTACTED NOVO AND THEY'D ALREADY SOLD IT BUT THEY SAID THEY'D MAKE ME ONE"

© Burak Cingi / Redferns / Getty Images

RIGHT Soccer Mommy playing at London's Scala, 2018

That step up was, says Allison, inspired partly by a refreshed pedalboard and a new amp. Allison added the Hologram Electronics Infinite Jets resynthesiser and Mr Black Ambience modulated reverb and delay to the line-up, alongside her ever-present Ibanez TS-9 Tube Screamer.

"It's changed so much [sonically]. Most of my equipment has changed. I have the Ambience for some light wobble, and it gives things a glittery sound. When I first started touring, I wasn't using a lot of effects and hadn't really figured out my tone. I had a Deluxe Reverb that sounded so nice clean, so I kept things clean. I've slowly got away from that, and introduced a bit more warmth and shimmer.

"I changed to a [Roland] Jazz Chorus and that was the game-changer. I'll never leave that amp behind. I've started building up some pedals around it that bring some nice atmospheric warmth, and the Infinite Jets brings in these weird ghost notes hovering around what I'm playing. It's just all about keeping it tasteful and not overdoing it."

MUSIC MAGPIE

As well as a pretty tidy selection of pedals, a quick scroll through Allison's social media feeds will reveal a voracious appetite for guitar collecting. She's played a Guild Jetstar and a Phantom Teardrop, as well as Mustangs, Jazzmasters, Jaguars and numerous Strats. Her tally of the latter currently stands at three, including her primary guitar, a Purple Sparkle '94 model that's all over *Color Theory*.

"I just love the tone and, in my opinion, if you're recording direct in, the only guitar that's going to sound nice is a Strat," says Allison. "The pickups sound really great clean, and with effects.

"I have one that I got when I was 14, a Hot Rod, off-white with a mint pickguard. It has these Klein jazz pickups that sound amazing. I have another off-white one that Fender gave me, the American Vintage, which sounds amazing too.

"Then there's my favourite, a '94 Custom Shop Strat with a Purple Sparkle holographic finish. It's my favourite thing ever. The pickups sound really great, the body feels great, and part of it is that it looks incredible. If I had to design my own Custom Shop guitar, that's exactly what it would be. It's definitely the main guitar on the album."

There is a new guitar challenging the '94 Strat for prominence in Allison's collection, however. Built in her home city, Dennis Fano's Nashville company provided a custom-made Novo Serus J in Allison's favoured Purple Sparkle finish. The dazzling offset has a bespoke fretboard etching that reads "Gemini bitch".

"I was scrolling Instagram one day and saw a Purple Sparkle Novo," says Allison. "I contacted Novo and they'd already sold it but they said they'd make me one. I came up with the idea to get an engraving on the fretboard, which they'd never done before. They did it in this super-cool Buffy-style font, and it's the coolest thing in my entire house.

"Those guitars sound so amazing and the Mastery bridge is fantastic. It's hard to go back to any of my guitars that don't have one now. I was never one to use the whammy bar but now I've got the Mastery bridge I use it every two seconds because it can bend so far and still stay in tune. It's become a necessity.

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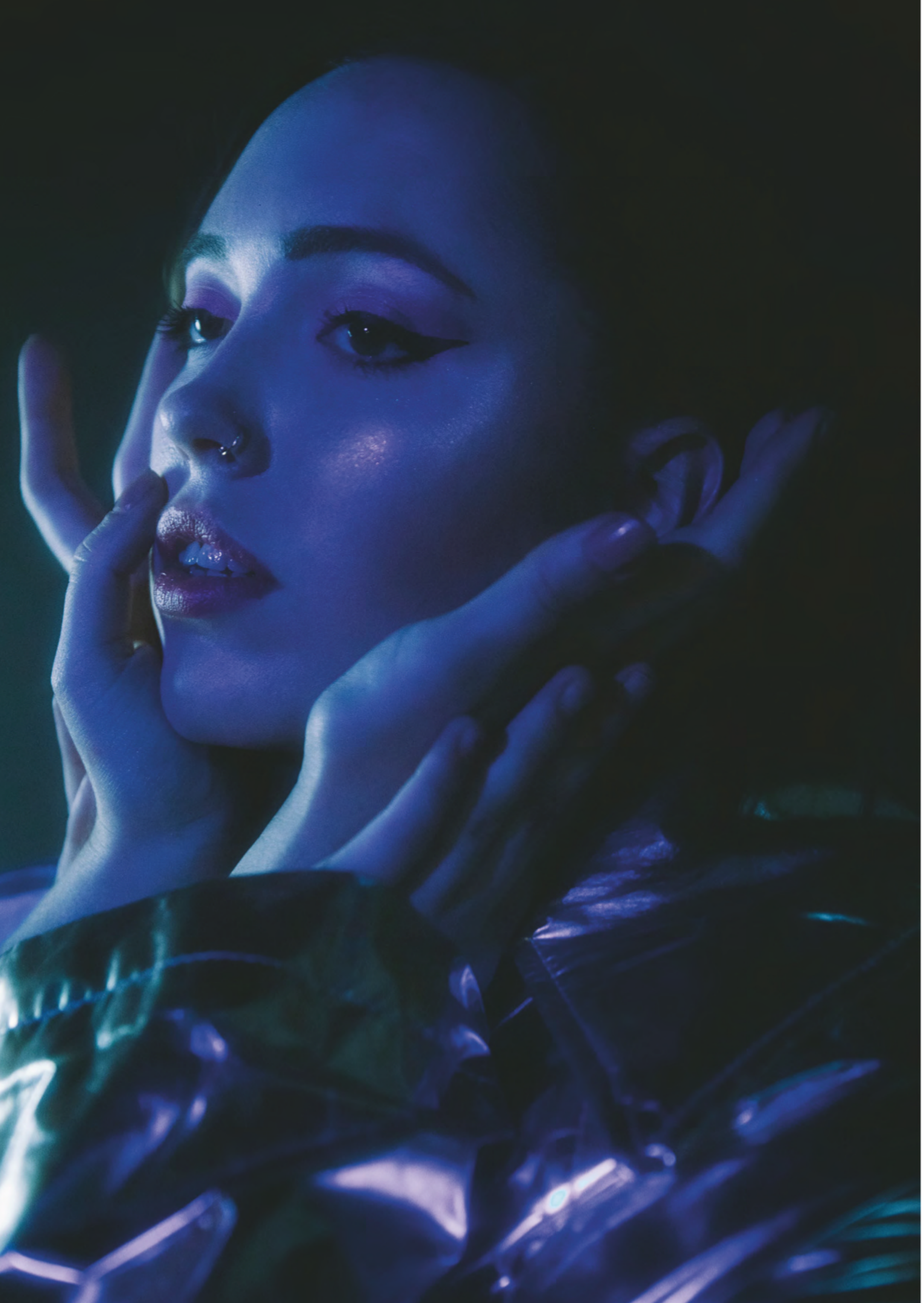

18+

WHAT IS AVAXHOME?

AVAXHOME-

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"I love the tone, it cuts way more than the other guitars I have. It's got P-90s and a really nice sharp tone. A lot of the stuff on *Color Theory* sounds so much better with a lot more cut."

BREAKING THE MOULD

While new guitars undoubtedly help spark songwriting inspiration, Allison admits to battling against the same constraints that all players experience from time to time. Having played the guitar for nearly 20 years, how does she overcome the limitations imposed by her own knowledge? One of the answers to that lies in her frequent use of alternate tunings.

"For someone who's been playing a long time, I just know the numbers a little too well I guess," she says. "I jump automatically to things that are obvious to me but when you play something in a new tuning, you have no clue what chords you're playing.

"It's all based on your ear and that's how you get these amazing new chords. It makes it all your own, breaking it down and learning again from nothing. Everything you find out of it is your own new way of playing these chords.

"The one I use the most is open A. I love it," says Allison. "You can play anything in open A and it's pretty much going to sound great. It can sound beautiful, it can sound dark and it can sound really fun too. I've also been playing with this new tuning recently, DACGAE. It's a really cool Joni Mitchell tuning, and even strumming open chords in it sounds amazing."

"I FEEL LIKE I'VE ALMOST FINISHED THE NEW RECORD. I'VE GOT SEVEN SONGS. IT'S PRETTY CLOSE. IT'S ALMOST DONE. IT'S WEIRD TO BE MOVING AWAY FROM *COLOR THEORY* BUT I'M JUST AS FOND AND PROUD OF IT AS I EVER WAS"

No doubt some of those tunings will appear on Soccer Mommy's third album. Our call nearing its end, Allison casually drops into conversation that her next record is almost complete – just four months after the release of *Color Theory*. She's nothing if not prolific.

"I feel like I've almost finished the new record," she says. "I've got seven songs. It's pretty close. It's almost done. It's weird to be moving away from *Color Theory* but I'm just as fond and proud of it as I ever was. I want to get better and better. Even though I love *Color Theory*, I'm motivated by trying to do something even cooler with the next thing I make.

"It's going to be different. It's a strange mix of songs. They're in some ways very far from each other but I see little ties that connect them. I like it when a record doesn't sound the same all the way through – some songs are dark, some are more produced and upbeat, others are more stripped down and natural."

At the heart of all that fresh creativity, will we be hearing more from Allison's pair of Purple Sparkle favourites – the '94 Strat and the Novo Serus J? "Oh yeah," she says. "They'll definitely be on it."

Check out the Soccer Mommy & Friends Single Series at sopharela.bandcamp.com

THE MONEY SHOT

BRIAN RAY'S FACTORY BLACK 1963 CUSTOM TELECASTER

A double-bound dream machine from the Paul McCartney guitarist's collection

Here's one for those of you who like your guitars served extremely rare: a 1963 Fender Custom Telecaster in factory black from the scintillating collection of current Paul McCartney guitarist and former Etta James bandleader Brian Ray. Residing squarely in the 'find another one' category, this double-bound beauty is not only in superb original condition but it's a wonderful playing and sounding instrument too.

"I got it about three and a half years ago from a reputable dealer in Australia," says Brian. "It's the only one known to exist, as far as I can tell. It's just a killer guitar. I saw it on Instagram and we went back and forth on the price for a little while.

"Even though it was so far away… Teles rarely aren't great from those years. This is a great guitar and I'm really fond of it.

"A lot of custom-colour Fenders got down to Australia for some reason, and custom colours were out of favour for many years and were often getting stripped and finished natural. There were so many great guitars that were stripped and then refinished. Because Fender makes a double-bound black Tele now, it seems common, but to find an original one is absolutely not."

Follow Brian on Instagram @brianrayguitar and visit *Guitar.com* to see more of his collection

Fender
Custom Telecaster

VINTAGE BENCH TEST

1963 GIBSON J-50

A vintage Gibson acoustic is a secret weapon for many producers and this gorgeous example certainly has *that* sound

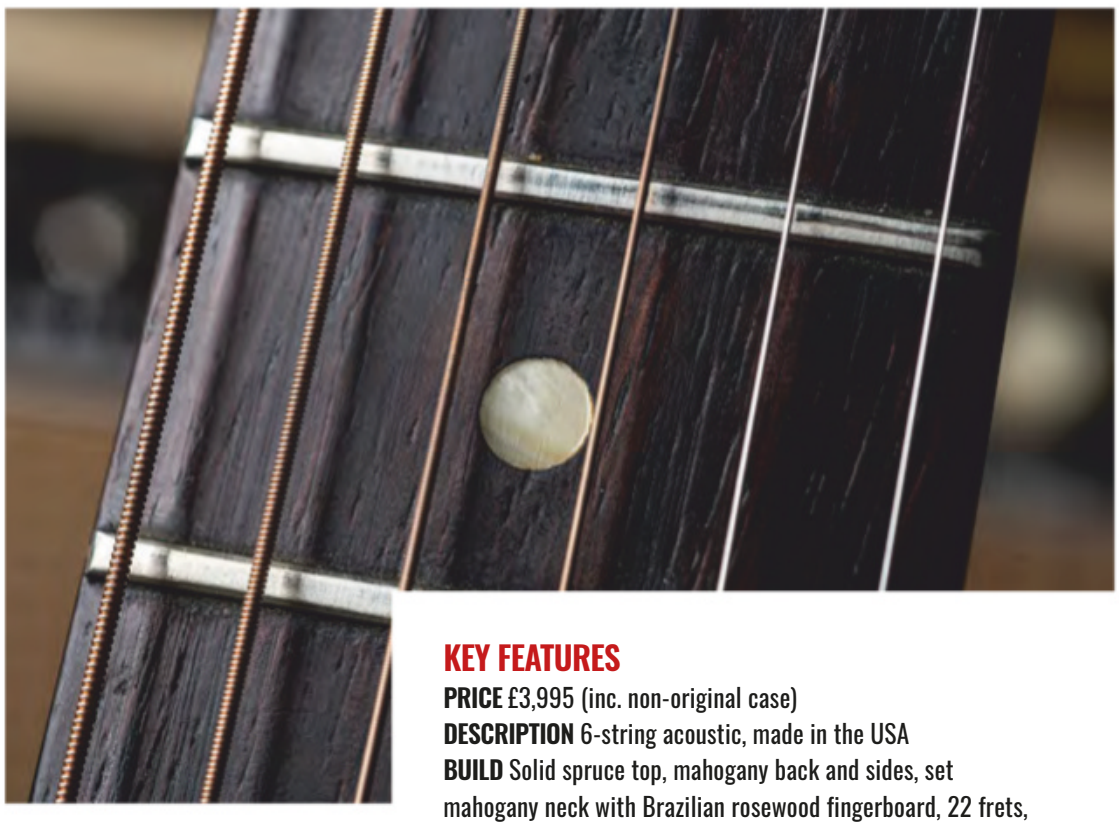
WORDS HUW PRICE
PHOTOGRAPHY ELEANOR JANE

Over the years, Gibson's more spartan designs have often proven more popular than its top-of-the-range bling machines. Les Paul Standards are generally preferred to Customs, the simplicity of the ES-335 has greater appeal than the ES-345 and ES-355, and so it is with the J-45 and J-50 acoustics.

In the case of the aforementioned electric guitars, there were significant structural, stylistic and electronic differences within the range. But the only feature that distinguishes a J-50 from a J-45 is the former's natural finish. It takes longer to spray a sunburst, of course, but maybe Gibson was able to hide the imperfections of lower-grade spruce tops in the shade.

Otherwise, the pre-1969 slope-shouldered dreadnought body shape, with its spruce top and mahogany back and sides, is identical. There's nothing fancy on the inlay or scratchplate fronts either so, in essence, the J-50 is a J-45 with a different finish.

Fender



ABOVE TOP The Gibson logo remains intact

ABOVE LEFT All 22 frets on the Brazilian rosewood 'board have years left in them

ABOVE RIGHT This J-50 is of Gibson's adjustable-bridge era

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £3,995 (inc. non-original case)
DESCRIPTION 6-string acoustic, made in the USA
BUILD Solid spruce top, mahogany back and sides, set mahogany neck with Brazilian rosewood fingerboard, 22 frets, multi-ply body binding on front, single-ply binding on rear, pearloid dot markers
HARDWARE Kluson single-line 3-on-a-plate tuners
ELECTRONICS K&K three-sensor bridge-plate pickup system with endpin jack socket
SCALE LENGTH 625mm/24.6"
NECK WIDTH 43.2mm at nut, 53mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 21.1mm at first fret, 24mm at 12th fret
STRING SPACING 37mm at nut, 52.7mm at bridge
WEIGHT 2.15kg/4.73lb
FINISH Natural gloss nitrocellulose
CONTACT atbguitars.com

This 1963 model is lovely but it has history. There's nothing sinister, just evidence of the running repairs that will always be required on vintage acoustics that people want to play rather than just hang on a wall.

There was a time when celluloid was the only pickguard material available but, in retrospect, gluing it onto wood tops was probably asking for trouble. Celluloid tends to shrink and warp, ditto spruce. But these two materials don't always agree on the direction or the extent of their movement. This may explain why Gibson changed to thicker and more stable styrene scratchplates later in 1963.

Here, the top has cracked from the soundhole to the bridge but somebody has done a solid repair by closing the gap and reinforcing with cleats to prevent the crack from opening again. The 'guard has also caused the top to curl upwards around the perimeter of the scratchplate rings but again it appears stable and solid.

The top's centre seam has seen some glue over the years but it was done professionally and almost invisibly. There are scratches behind the bridge, which suggests it may have been reglued. It appears tightly bonded to the top, though there are gaps at the edges and rear.

Two additions have been made: a strap button on the treble side of the heel, and a fine-sounding K&K three-sensor pickup system beneath the bridge plate.

The strap pin on the heel has been replaced with a strap button/jack socket combo, so this vintage J-50 is gig-ready.

We're pleased to see that the original single-line three-on-a-plate Kluson tuners are still present, and that they're in fine shape. In fact, the whole guitar is in fairly remarkable condition, with no discernible playwear on the back of the neck and barely a hint of buckle rash on the back.

The all-important neck joint looks absolutely rock solid, with no heel gap or lacquer cracks along the join line. The original frets are hardly worn and this J-50 still has its factory fitted nylon nut. The Brazilian rosewood fingerboard shows some very minor wear over the first three frets and the neck lacquer looks shiny up to the fourth and a bit dull above that. It's reasonable to conclude that whoever owned this guitar previously rarely ventured beyond the cowboy chord positions.

ABOVE Thankfully, rather than a plastic unit, this J-50 features a rosewood bridge

In 1963, Gibson made the lamentable decision to replace the rosewood bridges on the J-45, J-50 and various LG models with plastic units. You may wonder how they glued plastic onto the spruce, and the answer is that they didn't. Instead they were bolted to the top. We're pleased to see, though, that this guitar never suffered that fate.

Here, there's Gibson's 'backwards' rosewood bridge with two pearl dots covering the locating bolts, and a full set of original bridge pins. It also features Gibson's adjustable saddle design. The saddle here is rosewood and there's a small screw at each end to set the height.

It's widely accepted that transferring string energy to the top as efficiently as possible is fundamental to achieving great acoustic tone, and builders put a lot of effort into ensuring that saddles are perfectly square along the bottom so that maximum physical contact is made. With Gibson's adjustable arrangement, the saddle is only coupled to the top at each end. Is it detrimental to tone? Let's find out.

IN USE

This guitar plays flawlessly. The neck profile has a medium depth, with the soft shoulders that grace Gibson's finest necks. This one eases into your hands and makes the guitar feel like you've been playing it for decades. In addition, the nut is in perfect condition, the action is fairly low and could even go lower, and the original frets have years of life left.

The dry, warm and mellow tones are even more familiar than the neck profile. It doesn't do airy harmonics or thunderous bass. Instead the focus is on the midrange, with a gentle punch and clear string separation. Some vintage J-45s and J-50s of the adjustable-bridge era have been converted with bone, ceramic and Tusq saddles. It's probable that a saddle swap would enhance sustain, treble response and

harmonic complexity but the case for doing so isn't clear cut. In short, this 1963 guitar is a one-stop solution if you're looking to emulate those fantastic Gibson acoustic tones heard on so many classic recordings.

Yes, there's a muted quality and, from a player's perspective, it's not especially loud, but this J-50 projects into a room very nicely and certainly won't overpower a singer. The shorter sustain also provides rhythm parts with percussive drive and brings superb clarity to intricate fingerpicking. Microphone tests also demonstrate that it's extremely easy to record and sits in mixes without cluttering anything up.

This guitar may have had some minor issues in the past but we feel that its best years lie ahead. It has a charming old-school tone but doesn't sound dated at all. The warmth, intimacy and gentle dynamics are extremely player-friendly and it's one of those guitars that is almost impossible to put down. G

LEFT The original single-line three-on-a-plate Kluson tuners are not only present and correct but in good shape

© Fiona Beattie

ONE WORD SAM

Thanks to the work of a little-known guitar tech, Peter Green's famous 1959 Les Paul sounded like no other Les Paul ever had before, and sent tone-hounds on a decades-long search to attain the magic recipe. That tech was Sam Li – immigrant, guitarist, luthier and repairman to the stars. This is his story

WORDS MARK EGLINTON

The world of guitars is rife with the names of semi-mythical and often unsung characters, few more so than that of Sam Li. His is a name that, until recently, you'd probably only be familiar with if you've spent an inordinate amount of time digging deep into the sub-layers of various guitar and music electronics forums. The man existed, no doubt. But the exact nature of his exploits was always a source of mere speculation.

In 2019, however, that speculation crystallised in this writer's book, *The Guitar Man: Sam Li*. In the course of compiling the book, not only was new information uncovered but with it came a sense that this modest, retiring man's contribution to the UK guitar arena in the golden era of London's guitar scene has been vastly overlooked since his passing in 2005.

Born in Georgetown, Guiana (now Guyana) in 1928 to Indonesian and Chinese parents, Li worked as a cabinet-maker, having been taught woodworking by his elder brother Joe. He also loved playing jazz guitar, and was reputedly part of a trio that included pianist Iggy Quail, who'd later become an underground legend in the London jazz scene of the 1970s.

Like Quail, and indeed many of his contemporaries at the time, Li boarded a plane to London in 1952 as part of the Windrush Programme, in search of new opportunities in Britain. Upon arriving in London, Sam soon reconnected with friends from Guiana, many of whom had taken up residence in the Bayswater area and were continuing to play jazz in the surrounding clubs and bars. It seemed he was in his element.

TIN PAN GUITAR TECH

Given his woodworking background, his love of guitars, and the booming scene in London, which at the time was driving a continuous need for guitar techs, there was a degree of inevitability that Li would begin working at the Selmer Musical Instrument shop at 114-116 Charing Cross Road in 1961.

At the time, Selmer's was known as one of London's finest purveyors of musical instruments, complete with an imposing shopfront and a sea of polished glass cabinets containing only the best instruments inside. But Selmer's was more than just a shop. Down in its basement corridor stuffed haphazardly with random components, the team also ran a comprehensive repair service. The two combined to make Selmer's a regular hangout for the aspiring musicians of London's vibrant and rapidly evolving music scene, and the likes of Paul Kossoff, Jerry Donahue and John McLaughlin even worked there in various salesman capacities to make the ragged ends of their gigging exploits meet.

Li was initially a regular customer at Selmer's but, over time, the staff began to recognise that his background could bring considerable expertise to the repair department, and so he was offered a job. Thus, as the 1960s rolled on, Sam Li became known as one of London's premier set-up and repair guys. Not only was he skilled when it came to nuts-and-bolts repairs, he also possessed a fundamental understanding of how human and guitar interacted, and instinctively knew what a player needed and how to give it to them. From all reports, he was a man of extraordinary calm wisdom.

When he wasn't teaching John McLaughlin the subtleties of jazz chord phrasing on their lunch breaks, Sam Li was being tasked with the repair of the instruments of the burgeoning slew of the day's players. One of those players was Peter Green, who at that time had just replaced Eric Clapton in John Mayall's Bluesbreakers.

The story behind Green's '59 Les Paul Standard, Greeny, has long been the stuff of guitar lore. Even Green himself had no firm recollection of what happened during a simple pickup-repair job in 1968 to transform a guitar he reputedly had little affection for into something that, at the time, sounded like no other Les Paul Standard on the planet. Enter Sam Li.

TOP LEFT Sam jamming with friends in his Bayswater flat, 1959

TOP RIGHT Li diligently practising jazz on what looks to be a modded Gibson ES-175

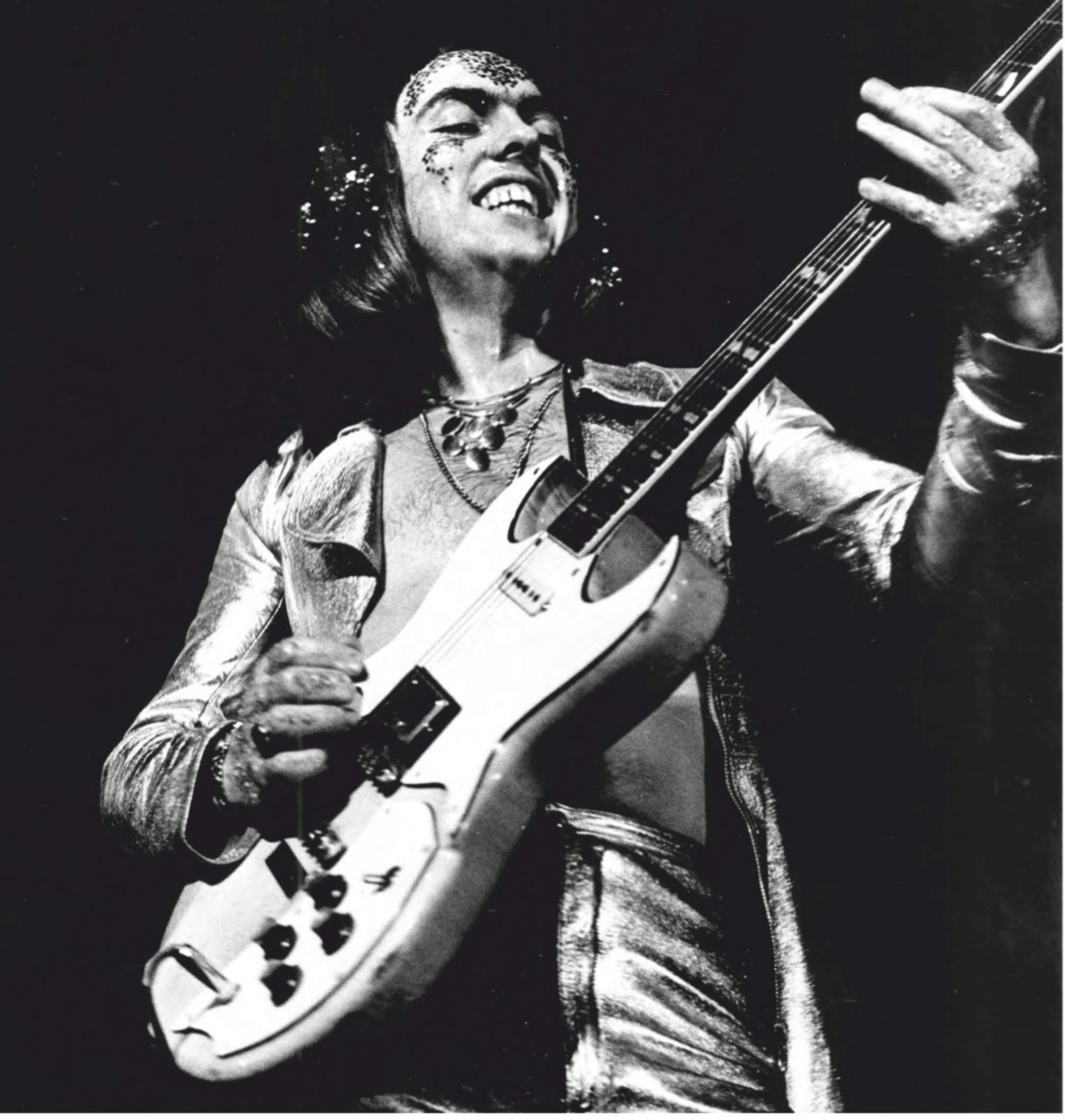
MID LEFT Sam visiting a musician friend in the US in the early 1990s

MID RIGHT Sam (bottom left) and his Guianese friends, 1959

BOTTOM LEFT Another satisfied customer for Sam when he worked as a repairman at Selmer's, 1960

BOTTOM RIGHT Sam and his biker buds, 1959

BOTTOM Sam (centre) at a friend's wedding reception in London, 1960



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ABOVE Slade's Dave Hill in awe of his Sam Li-built custom natural-finished double-cut at 1973's Pop Gala de Vliegermolen in Voorburg, Netherlands

GREENY FOR GO

The story goes that at some point in 1968, Green's guitar was dropped off at Selmer's and, like hundreds of others, was passed downstairs to the repair guys, of which Sam Li was just one. What exactly Green wanted is unclear. Some stories have suggested that the neck pickup had a fault or was poorly seated, others hinted that Green simply didn't like how the guitar sounded in the neck position. Whatever the facts were, Li was tasked with repairing and reinstalling the neck pickup.

So what actually happened? Until 2019, it was tough to say for sure that Sam had actually done the job. But then *Guitar Magazine* contributor and author Steve Clarke noted a remarkable similarity between the wiring on Greeny and that of a custom electric made by Sam for Slade's Dave Hill, which he'd investigated for the magazine in 2015. Clarke observes that Li was not known for his wiring, which perhaps explains a certain type of grey cable used in both jobs – crudely effective it may have been but it certainly wasn't the material normally used for such purposes. "It was the kind of wire you might see on your grandmother's table lamp," said Clarke. "It is almost certainly the work of the same person."

The wiring used to repair the pickup was one thing but the manner in which Greeny's pickup was reinstalled is even more important. As confirmed by Greeny's one-time custodian Phil Harris, who knew Li personally back in the 1970s, it was well known in London guitar circles at the time that Sam Li had been responsible for Greeny's dramatically altered sound – and in three key ways. Firstly, he'd used the unsuitable grey leader cable. Secondly, he'd rewound the pickup too loosely (which isn't a bad thing for tone) and with the incorrect gauge wire. Finally, in Sam Li's unwitting coup de grâce, he'd reinstalled the magnet under the coils the wrong way around.

This effectively reversed the polarity, which in turn gave the Les Paul an odd out-of-phase sound when both pickups were used in the middle position. Voila! That's how, from 1968 onwards, whether in the hands of Peter Green, Gary Moore, who bought the guitar from Green, or its current custodian, Metallica's Kirk Hammett, Greeny remains a truly special-sounding guitar.

What we'll never know is whether Sam Li did any of the above intentionally in some bold bid to push the sonic envelope on a guitar used by a prolific player. While Sam did indeed experiment with pickup configurations later in his career – most notably on a number of bizarre modification projects for Yes guitarist Steve Howe, with whom he later went into business – it seems more likely that it was all just a series of well-intentioned mistakes. Mistakes that nevertheless cemented his name into guitar folklore.

BRANCHING OUT

But Greeny was just a brief, if memorable, slice of Sam Li's long life in guitar repair. In fact, 1968 was really just the beginning of a fruitful period for him. He left Selmer's not long after, and set up in first-floor premises on Soho's Gerrard Street. His decision to strike out on his own only enhanced his reputation as a craftsman whose skills were sought out by many of the biggest guitar players of the era.

Status Quo's Francis Rossi swore by Sam Li, to the extent that he claimed Li knew his famous green Telecaster better than he did. The guitar was regularly in the Gerrard Street workshop for tweaks to rectify the common tuning gremlins associated with the Tele's three-saddle bridge.

Paul Kossoff entrusted his Les Paul to Sam after he'd dropped it headstock-down on stage at Newcastle's Mayfair Ballroom in 1972. The quality of the repair is reputedly astonishing, and was done with painstaking reverence for Gibson's original build quality and cosmetic finish.

Howe, Sacha Distel, Andy Summers, Dave Gilmour, Mark Knopfler and Albert Lee all relied on Li's shrewd craftsmanship, and took a certain masochistic pleasure from his withering sideways glances and monosyllabic approach to customer service – in West End circles, he was affectionately referred to as 'One-word Sam'.

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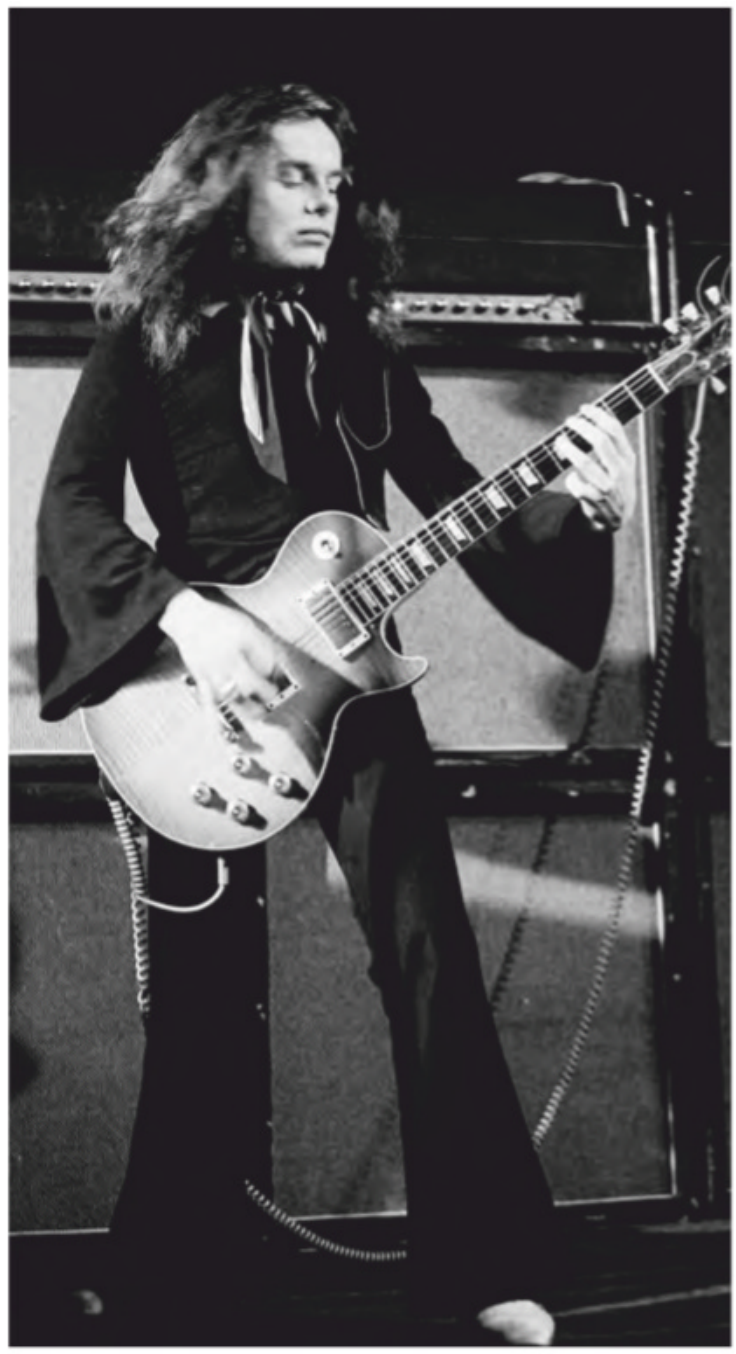
ABOVE The now-famous guitar made by Sam Li in 1968, and later bought from the window of Sound City music store by Slade's Dave Hill



© Michael Putland / Getty Images

ABOVE RIGHT Free guitarist Paul Kossoff performing at Newcastle City Hall in 1972. Koss trusted Sam to repair his Les Paul after he snapped the neck later that year

Even Rod Stewart, Elton John, Alice Cooper and Eric Clapton were reputedly seen in his workshop at various times, though we can't find any hard proof to back up those rumours.

TOP CARVES

In addition to day-to-day repairs, Sam Li also turned his hand to making custom instruments over the years. How many actually exist is unknown but the natural-finished double-cut used by Hill is perhaps the most well documented, Hill's father having spotted the guitar in the window of a West End music shop in 1968, with it going on to be used on most of Slade's biggest hits.

But that's not the only Sam Li guitar that found its way into notable hands. There's a Les Paul variant reportedly owned by Alan Holdsworth and later played by Jeff Beck and Jeff Lynne in AIR Studios during the 1970s. Then there's a custom V with a single humbucker in a central position, made to order for Wishbone Ash's Andy Powell, plus another V that was recently sold on eBay and belonged to a gentleman named Tommy Willis in the early 1970s. At the time, Willis was a tea boy in Sound City but he later went on to become Chris Rea's guitar tech.

All of these guitars are beautifully made and reflective of Sam Li's fastidious attention to detail. In making them, it was as if Sam Li knew that, one day long after he was gone, people would value instruments that were hand-made and with a level of thought and care too scarcely seen in modern guitar making.

Sadly, things did not continue to go smoothly for Sam Li. He parted ways with Howe, with whom he shared shop premises in Hampstead, and the late 1980s and early 1990s gradually curtailed his guitar-related activities. Health issues played a part in this but so did the changing face of the music industry.

As roadies morphed into guitar techs for bands big and small, there was less work being brought in for old-school repairmen such as Sam, while the era of brand endorsement meant that often it was easier for an artist to get a replacement guitar sent out than to get something fixed on the road. The days of frantic phone calls from touring musicians to request quick refrets or neck repairs on tight deadlines were waning.

Sam Li passed away in 2005, and in the years prior he contented himself with spending time with his family, making furniture and, of course, playing his jazz guitar. While he would accept party invitations when asked, he rarely spoke of his many relationships with the musicians who held him and his work in such high regard.

Sam was a dedicated craftsman who shunned any limelight that might have come his way. Instead, he left us his work, in the guise of handmade guitars and his association with some iconic instruments. In the aftermath of Peter Green's passing in July, it seems that the acknowledgment of Sam's role in the creation of Green's unique sound will only grow. "The guitar has an active fanbase that existed way before I came into contact with it," said Greeny's current custodian Kirk Hammett recently. "If any guitar on the planet is 'of the people', it's that one."

Through this and indeed the guitars that passed through his hands, Sam Li's legacy endures. What finer tribute to his work could there be? G

The Guitar Man: Sam Li by Mark Eglinton and Fiona Beattie was published by Rudling House in October 2019 and is available now

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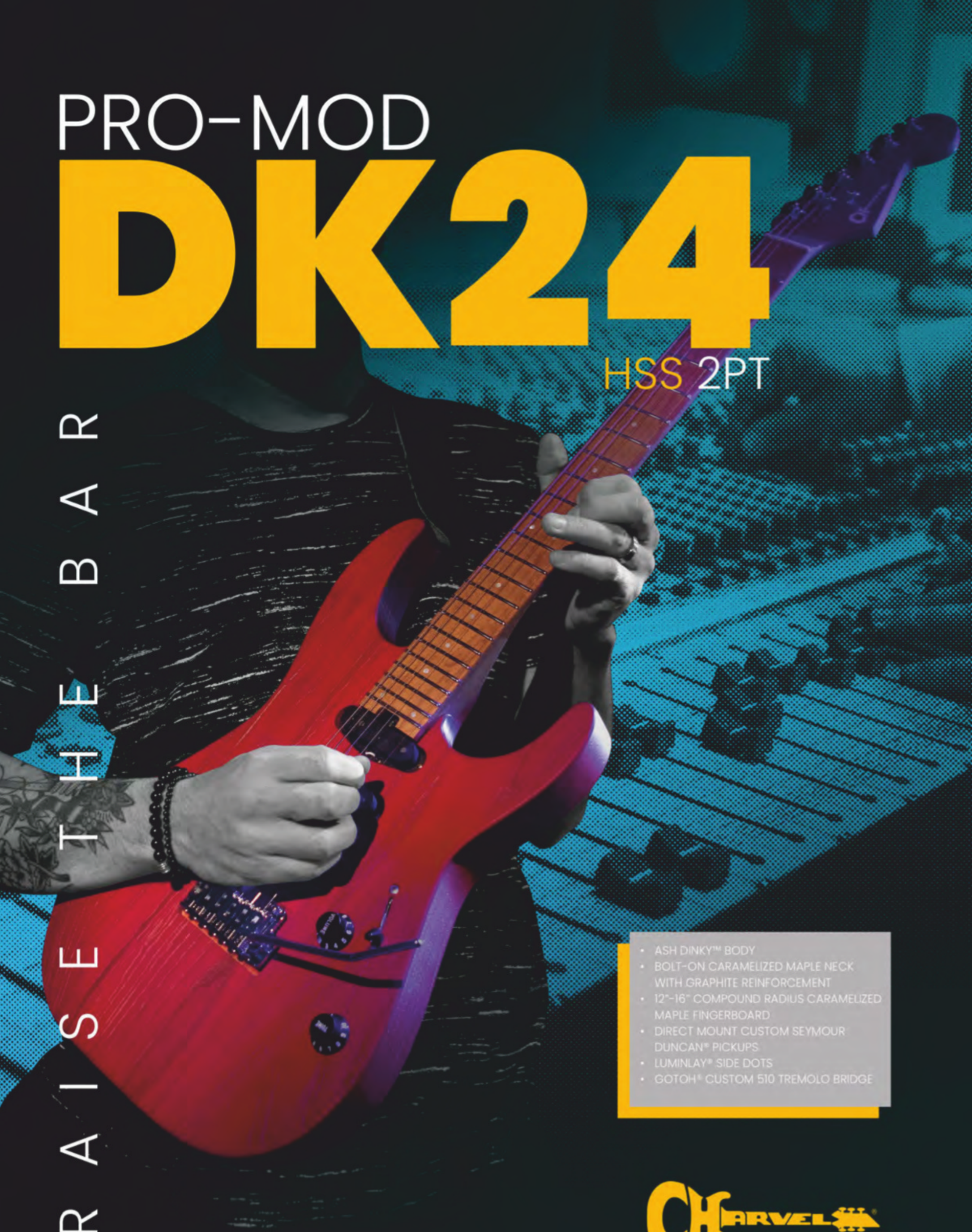

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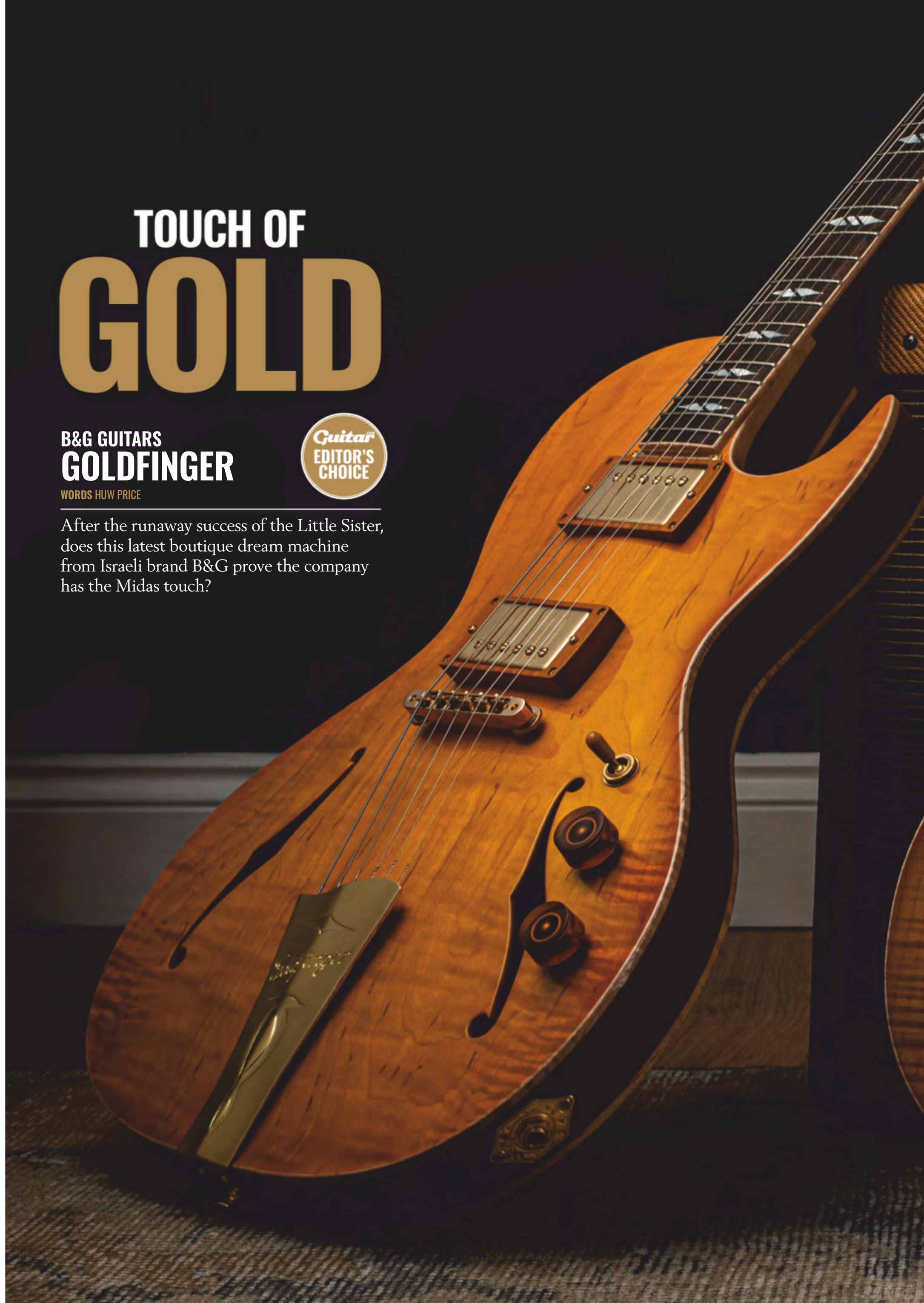
TOUCH OF GOLD

B&G GUITARS GOLDFINGER

Guitar.com EDITOR'S CHOICE

WORDS HUW PRICE

After the runaway success of the Little Sister, does this latest boutique dream machine from Israeli brand B&G prove the company has the Midas touch?



Goldfinger

It's been four years since we visited B&G's Tel Aviv headquarters. Even back then, there was a forthcoming model known as the Goldfinger in development. With a larger body than its much-loved Little Sister and Step Sister stablemates, and a 16th-fret neck join for easy upper-fret access, the Goldfinger is a flagship boutique design for players who refuse to compromise. Here, we're checking out a pair of Goldfingers in P-90 and humbucker flavours.

Both guitars certainly have a discernibly golden quality, achieved through the use of tinted transparent nitrocellulose lacquer. On the humbucker model, it's a rich amber-yellow that imparts a deep glow to the carved maple top. On the P-90 model, it's more like a faded vintage sunburst that never had any red mixed into the shading coats. Instead, there's a wonderfully smooth transition from the golden-yellow centre into a mid-brown. It has an impressive glow and the maple's figuring leaps right out. Flipping both guitars over, the solid maple backs have been given the same treatment and the timber is of no lesser quality.

B&G's nitro finishes are always superb and, as usual, there's a faux binding effect here achieved by sanding away the tinted coats around the edges. The maple itself isn't stained; because the colour tones come from the lacquer, it prevents the flame from becoming fixed. Much like a vintage Les Paul Standard, the maple figuring appears to move depending on the angle of the light.

Fan the flames: the P-90 model has a vivid flametop beneath its sunburst finish

Glow of contentment: the humbucker version has a plainer maple top with a rich amber-yellow glow

Head to toe: the fretboards feature maple binding to match the headstocks

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £5,499 (inc hard case)
DESCRIPTION Semi-hollow electric guitar, made in Israel
BUILD Routed mahogany body with carved maple front and back, one-piece mahogany set neck, ziricote fretboard with maple binding and 22 frets, ziricote headstock overlay with maple binding and bone nut
HARDWARE Cast gold-plated brass tailpiece, tune-o-matic bridge, open-gear tuners
ELECTRONICS 2x B&G humbucker or P-90 pickups, master volume and tone controls, 3-way pickup selector switch
SCALE LENGTH 24.6”/624mm
NECK WIDTH 42.9mm at nut, 52.6mm at 12th fret (humbucker model), 43.2mm at nut, 52.7mm at 12th fret (P-90 model)
NECK DEPTH 23mm at first fret, 25.2mm at 12th fret (humbucker model), 22.6mm at first fret, 25.2mm at 12th fret (P-90 model)
STRING SPACING 35.7mm at nut, 51.8mm at bridge
WEIGHT 2.88kg/6.35lb (humbucker model), 2.92kg/6.44lb (P-90 model)
FINISH Gloss nitrocellulose
CONTACT bngguitars.com

Gretsch

Sister act: like the B&G Step Sister, the Goldfinger's sleek ziricote-overlaid headstock is solid rather than slotted

Peeking inside the control cavity gives us a clearer idea about the way the Goldfingers are made. You can tell from the outside that the maple sandwich has a mahogany filling but, rather than the bent plywood sides of a Gibson-style semi, B&G has designed the body around a frame of solid mahogany that incorporates the sides and centre block.

Where the Little Sister's mahogany back is blind-routed, the voids in the Goldfinger's mahogany section are created instead by cutting all the way through the wood. The sides are about 10mm in thickness, while the inside surfaces of the maple top and back are carved to leave full-depth platforms that are subsequently glued to the mahogany centre sections. It's all very neatly done and, judging by the small amount of visible brown squeeze-out, B&G is using hide glue.

Under the hood, you'll also notice Switchcraft switches, CTS potentiometers and a tone capacitor wired 1950s-style, from the output lug of the volume control. The capacitor is inserted into what appears to be a brass tube with B&G branding; it's little details such as this that really impress.

B&G has never installed stop tailpieces, instead using bespoke cast units. It's the same here. There's a specially designed tailpiece that has the 'Goldfinger' legend in script and visual flourishes that echo the pearl inlays on the ziricote fretboard and elegant headstock.

The headstock is solid like the Step Sister's rather than slotted like the Little Sister's, and features maple binding to match the fretboard's. There's a ziricote veneer on the front, and gold-plated open-gear Gotoh tuners with B&G Private Build branding. The tune-o-matic bridge and pickup covers are gold-plated too, along with the SG-style spacer at the end of the neck that conceals the truss-rod adjuster wheel.

The only significant differences between these two Goldfingers are the pickups and the level of figuring on their maple tops and backs, with the P-90 model here having a more pronounced flame. B&G pickups are made in-house and unpotted in the vintage style. The humbucker rings are made in-house too, from maple stained to match the top.

IN USE

The Goldfinger is a long instrument – about 50mm longer than a Les Paul from headstock to tail – but the balance is excellent. When compared to the Little Sister, it seems B&G has increased the size of the hollow areas within the body by adding length rather than width. As a result, the Goldfinger retains the visual vibe of the Little Sister while providing the upper-fret access and two additional frets of the Step Sister.

Strike gold: the humbuckers sound bright but warm, powerful and clear

Compared to the last batch of Little Sister models we encountered, we find that B&G's neck carve has changed, quite subtly, for the better. The profile has acquired a slightly more precise and comfortable feel and, though it was very good to begin with, the soft V is now a little more pronounced. Both review guitars feel absolutely wonderful to play.

Despite their identical construction and hardware, however, these instruments sound slightly different unplugged. Whether that's attributable to variations in natural materials or the fact that the P-90s sit inside the body and the humbuckers are mounted to the top, it's hard to say. Either way, the P-90 version has a louder and brighter chime, while the humbucker model is smoother, warmer and more compressed. But the differences are small, neither is any better than the other, and both guitars have ample vibrancy, depth and sustain.

We plug into our Princeton-style Rift PR18 and just about manage to resist the strong urge to launch into a Bond theme. The P-90s are microphonic and extremely sensitive, and combine chiming twang with a full midrange growl. They're far closer to the P-90s of the late 1950s than those from earlier in that decade, and capture the acoustic qualities of the guitar rather well when played clean.

Switching over to our humbucker-loaded Goldfinger, the pickup screws have been set for optimum string balance – and it pays off. This is a superior set of PAF-style pickups that sound bright yet warm, powerful and clear. They also have just the right amount of microphony. Tonally, we hear something that sits between a really good ES-335 and a Les Paul, with an extra degree of clarity and definition.

Top gear: the gold-plated open-gear tuners are made for B&G by Gotoh

Both guitars sustain impressively, and they are surprisingly feedback-resistant. We also hear three distinct tones across each of the three pickup settings, and the middle positions of both guitars are a real highlight. Our only reservation is the beautifully carved but pointed heel, because it may be at odds with a guitar made for upper-fret access. But in all other regards, this is contemporary guitar building at its finest.

9/10 **Flawlessly built guitars with premium tonewoods, excellent pickups and a unique aesthetic**

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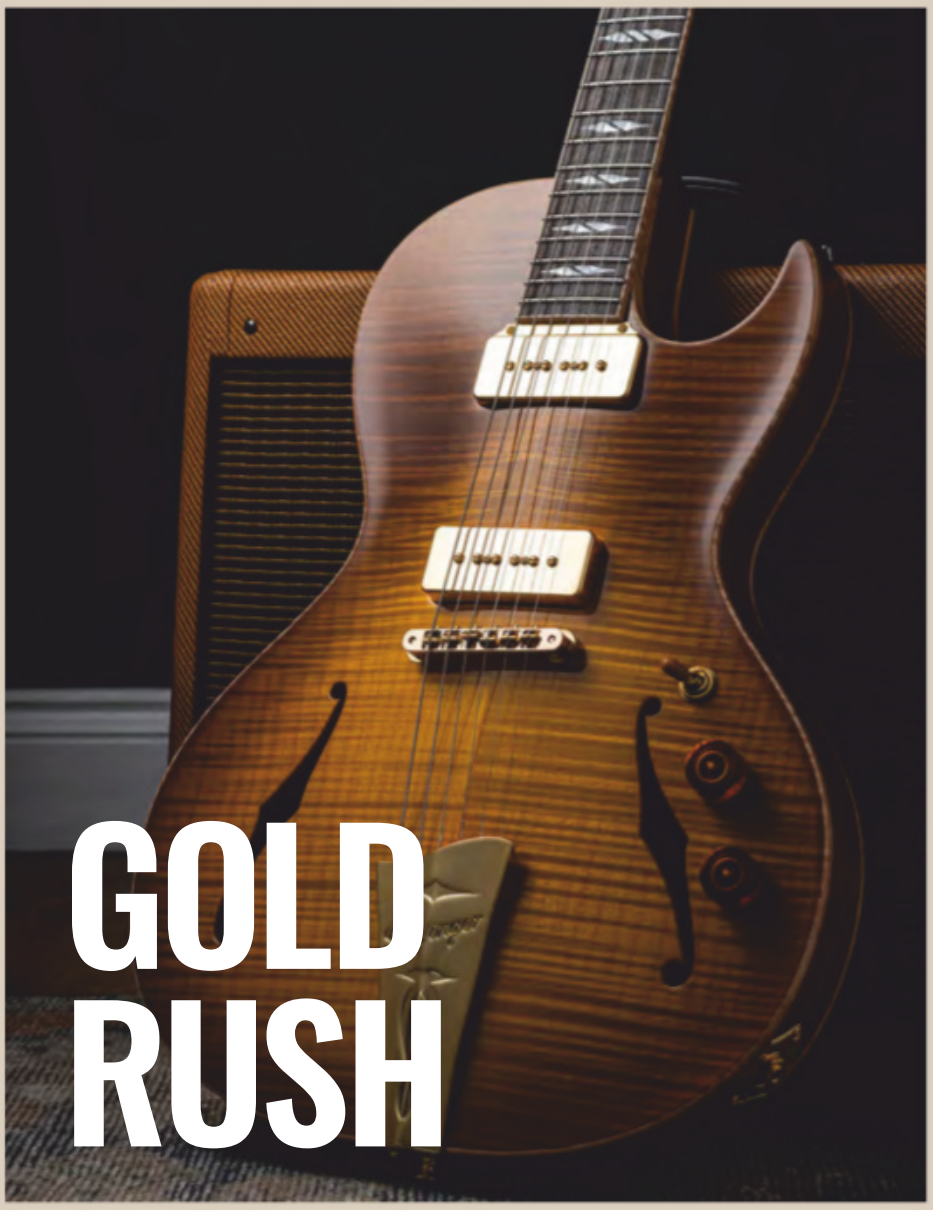


GOLD RUSH

B&G's CEO and co-founder Yotam Kiki Goldshtein discusses the design and development of the Goldfinger

What's the thinking behind this guitar?
"It's something I've had in mind for many years. I wanted to create something different, because that's what I do. I really like ES-335s but they feel too big, too heavy, and I don't like the fact that they are plywood. I wanted to do something like that but with higher-quality materials, something smaller than an ES-335 but bigger than a regular guitar and with solid woods."

How is the body architecture different to the Little Sister's?
"We kind of stretched it and, because it's an arched top, I carve the edges a little thinner just before they join to the sides. This helps the top vibrate more freely, like a drum skin or violin top. The body is made from one piece of African mahogany, including the centre block. We cut out the wood we don't need, and the maple tops are routed from both sides, like with a violin. It's very light too. I prefer light guitars. The top and back are glued directly onto the centre block, which gets around one of the ES problems, where the top and back sometimes separate."

What about the neck?
"I've stopped using Honduras mahogany as a default because the average weight was becoming heavier. I'm selecting mahogany by density and weight. It's genuine mahogany but it doesn't matter if it comes from Honduras or Fiji. The truss-rod is traditional single-action and, as with the Little Sister, I'm using a spoke wheel at the end of the fretboard because I want to keep the headstock strong."

The humbucker rings are an interesting idea.
"Customers can have plastic or wood but I like the wooden ones so I think they'll become standard. I'm working on wood pickup covers for P-90s too, so the rings and covers can match the bodies."

Did the Goldfinger go through a long development process?
"There weren't many versions because I knew what I wanted to do. We made one other that was a little bigger but then we made this shape and that was it. It's always very difficult to make something new look classic. It's really all in the little details, such as the inlays, as well as the tailpiece. It's quite complex to develop something like that. We cast them from brass and they're gold-plated. The tuners are gold-plated too, and they're made for us by Gotoh."

But the pickups are made in-house?
"Yes. They're exactly like vintage Gibson pickups and we match them to the specific guitar. We listen to the acoustic sound and if it's naturally bright or dark, we can balance that with slightly different pickup tones. We make P-90s and PAFs, and some customers ask for a PAF in the bridge with a P-90 neck but that's something I don't recommend because of the differences in character and output. For me, it doesn't sound natural."

LAZY

Geared up: the back-angled American maple headstock has Schaller open-gear 18:1 tuners

NIK HUBER
PIET

WORDS CHRIS VINNICOMBE

Guitar EDITOR'S CHOICE

A sophisticated blend of offset, Telecaster and Les Paul Junior influences from a guitar maker at the peak of his powers

Will the real Nik Huber please stand up? We're joking, of course, but there really do seem to be two distinct sides to this German luthier's guitar-building personality. On the one hand, there's the Orca and Rietbergen; exceptionally well built, with extraordinary figured timbers, and unabashedly indebted to Huber's former mentor Paul Reed Smith. On the other, there's the Twangmeister and Krautster; designs in which Huber's laser-like precision collides with a more road-ready retro aesthetic.

Introduced with minimal fanfare at the NAMM Show in January, the Piet (pronounced 'Pete') falls firmly into the second category. Named after Huber's youngest son and based around the existing Dolphin body shape, the Piet's development was driven partly by the current offset trend but also by the luthier's desire to push himself beyond the mahogany-style builds he's best known for. Huber acknowledges that by combining a contoured alder body with a bolt-on maple neck, he isn't exactly blazing a trail, but a year of sweating the small stuff led to an instrument that Nik and his team feel is all their own.

"With so many builders already producing phenomenal S-type, T-type and offset guitars, the last thing I wanted to do was make another, even if I do love those guitars. They have it covered," says Huber. "But with many of these guitars from builders I admire, the things that make them so beautiful and unique are in the details and the multitude of individual choices those builders take. I wanted that to be the case with this new model, which made it even more rewarding to see so many people checking out the Piet at NAMM, and saying that it had our unmistakable signature, our DNA and feel."

In recent years it's been possible to throw a stone at a guitar show and watch it ricochet off the bodies of dozens of small-shop offset builds. But there's definitely something different about the Piet. It doesn't actually have an offset-waist body, for a start, but the generous edge radiusing and plunging contours lend this compact bolt-on a snug and approachable feel, and the strapped-on balance is superb.

Though our review guitar's combination of a high-gloss polyurethane Silver Sparkle finish and pearloid scratchplate might not be for everyone, one of the major benefits of buying boutique is that, if your wallet stretches to it, you have much greater choice when it comes to specifications and aesthetics. The base Piet model is approximately £2,712 (€2,995) and comes with a wrapover hardtail as standard. One of the substantial upgrades here is the Mastery Offset Bridge and vibrato tailpiece, which adds an extra £602 (€665) to the purchase price, thanks to the cost of the hardware and the more labour-intensive build.

The pickups in our review model are German-made Häussel units featuring alnico V magnets, and comprise Harry Häussel's standard 1956 Soapbar P-90 in the bridge position and a scratchplate-mounted Broad unit at the neck. Again, other options are available but the tasty pairing here promises plenty of versatility.

As you'd expect from Huber, the Piet's build is exquisite and, aside from the tone knob's skirt almost touching the surface of the guitar's body, there's nothing to fault here.

High flying: Huber's five-screw neck joint and elegant sculpted heel combine to offer superior upper-fret access

The wiring is immaculate inside the shielded control cavity, where 500k CTS pots are joined by a TAD 0.022mfd 'orange drop' tone cap and a treble bleed on the volume control.

The satin nitro-finished American maple neck appears almost stark by Huber's usual heavily figured standards but you can always specify a vintage neck tint for an extra £237 (€265) if you find the boxfresh look a little pale. Although it's a bolt-on design, the neck carve has the depth and soft shoulders of an early Les Paul. But unlike a 1950s Gibson, the Piet's compound 10-14 inch fingerboard radius and almost sculptural heel carve combine to facilitate whole-tone 22nd fret bends without the need to break a sweat.

Our personal preference would be for a more generous roll on the edges of the East Indian rosewood fingerboard but there are certainly no rough areas or sharp fret ends to be found. The 6105-style fretwire was installed with invisible tangs, and the sterling-silver ring inlays are as flawless as they are classy.

IN USE

The Piet's acoustic response is interesting; it's almost like a thinline offset running through a compressor. There's a lively attack but more sustain than you'd expect, with no shortage of harmonic interest. Once the strings are stretched in, the Mastery vibrato operates beautifully, returning to pitch despite some pretty extreme bends.

The Huber-branded Schaller 18:1 tuners are also a great choice. Despite their vintage-style appearance, they operate smoothly and are sensitive to fine adjustments.

We set our Lazy J combo to the point where chiming clean tones give way to a classic rock roar when you dig in hard, and the Piet certainly doesn't disappoint. The balance between all three core tones is even in terms of output and frequency range, so there's no danger of dialling in that perfect bridge tone only to flip across to the neck pickup and feel the need to adjust your amp.

Did we mention perfect bridge pickup tones? The pickguard outline isn't the only thing this guitar has in common with a Les Paul Junior. The bridge P-90 has enough guts and grind for legs-akimbo 1970s rock

Task master: the Piet features Mastery's acclaimed twin-saddle Offset Bridge design

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £4,205 as reviewed (inc hard case)
DESCRIPTION Solidbody electric guitar, made in Germany
BUILD Alder body, American maple neck with five-screw join, 10-14" compound radius East Indian rosewood fingerboard with sterling-silver ring inlays and 22 medium frets. Bone nut
HARDWARE Mastery Offset Bridge and Vibrato tailpiece, Schaller open-gear 18:1 tuners
ELECTRONICS Häussel 1956 Soapbar P-90 (bridge) and Broad single-coil (neck), 3-way blade selector switch, master volume with treble bleed circuit, master tone
SCALE LENGTH 25.5"/648mm
NECK WIDTH 42.1mm at nut, 52.0mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 23.0mm at first fret, 25.4mm at 12th fret
STRING SPACING 35.5mm at nut, 51.6mm at bridge
WEIGHT 3.49kg/7.7lb
FINISH Silver Sparkle polyurethane (£891/€985 upcharge)
OPTIONS Base model is £2,712 (€2,995). Mastery Bridge and Offset Vibrato is £602 (€665). Custom-colour prices depend on finish chosen. Other wood and pickup choices available
LEFT-HANDERS Yes
CONTACT nikhuber-guitars.com

but also offers sufficient clarity and separation for pedal notes to ring out in Foo Fighters-style chord progressions.

The crowd-pleasers on the setlist for your next gig at the local are covered, then, but before you touch that three-way switch, judicious use of the volume and tone controls can summon up many more subtle textures. We find ourselves riding the tone control a lot more than usual, as there are so many interesting voices to unlock here.

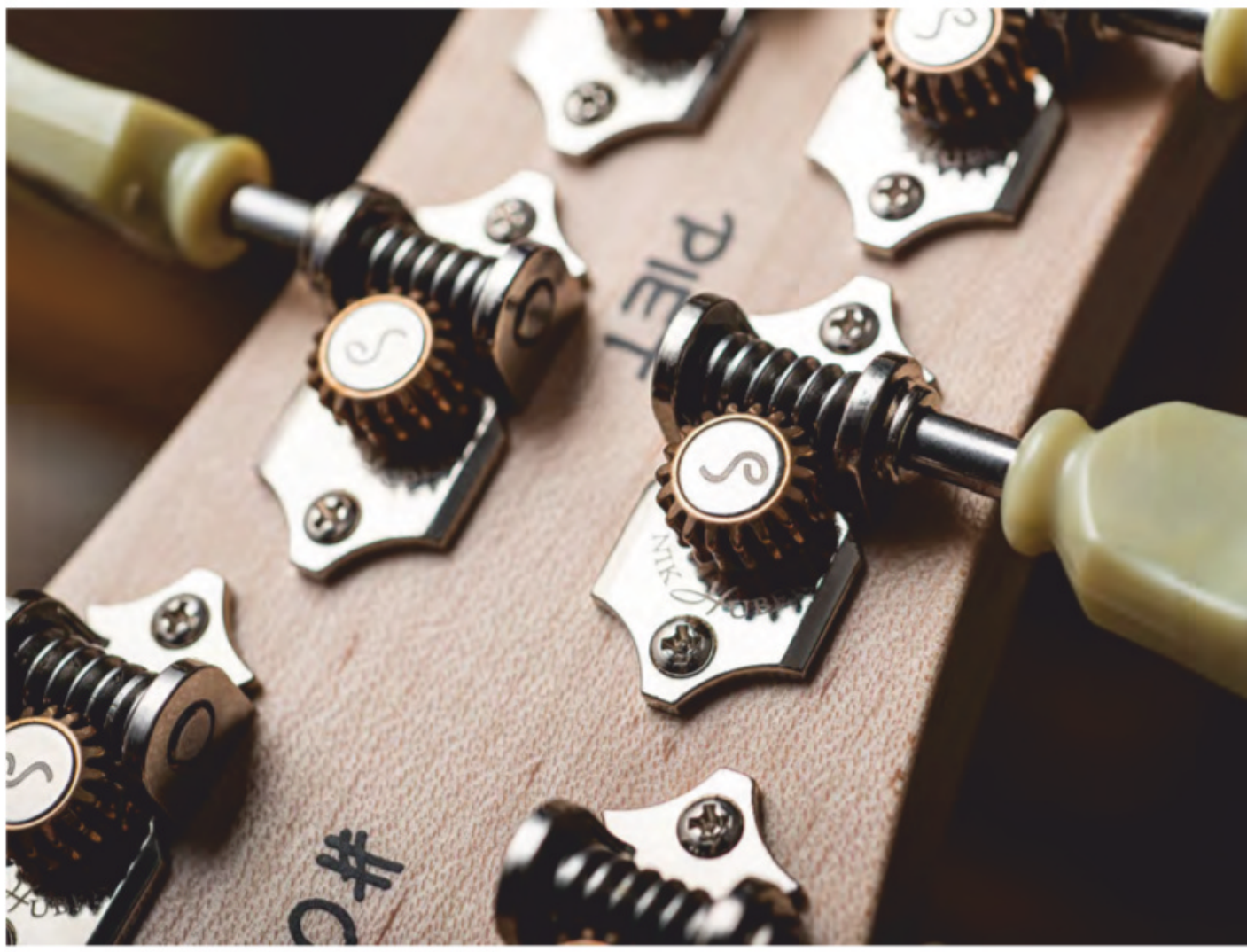
Every picking hand nuance is captured in detail by the Häussel P-90 and spacious lead explorations are only enhanced by the lengthy sections of string between the Mastery bridge and tailpiece. It's much like the way an old ladder-braced parlour acoustic gives the impression of having its own built-in spectral reverb; all those overtones might just make your regular hardtail electric sound, well, a little bland in comparison.

Switching to the middle setting proves no less beguiling. It's here that the Piet is at its most 'offset' in tone, and greying teenagers of the 1990s will no doubt delight in busting out their best Sonic Youth moves – albeit on a guitar that we'd wager provides a somewhat smoother and more stable ride than anything you'd have found in Thurston Moore and Lee Ranaldo's road cases back in the day.

Crucially though, at no point does the Piet feel too polite to drag into murky waters

Call it a wash: Harry Häussel's 1956 Soapbar P-90 is toneful and versatile

Silver linings: the East Indian rosewood 'board has sterling-silver ring inlays



or too refined to hit hard. In fact, the quality of the build is such that it'll stand up to the most punishing of tasks, seemingly regardless of how aggressive or percussive your right-hand attack is.

If you favour a more sophisticated approach, switch to the neck pickup for everything from astral Hendrix and Gilmour-style excursions to haunting Radiohead arpeggios, expressive big-bottle blues, piano-like first position chords… we could go on. And everything we love about the usability of the full range of the volume and tone controls in conjunction with the bridge pickup applies here too.

Although the Piet falls into the more accessible end of the Nik Huber catalogue, there's no denying that it still represents a considerable investment, especially when equipped with the custom options sported by our review model. However, this is a special electric guitar that proves character and mojo can coexist with precision and an eye for detail. Sure, there's plenty of competition out there in a boutique market saturated with Mastery-equipped, offset-influenced designs. But you won't find many as enthralling or as well-conceived as this. G

9/10 **Virtuoso luthiery from a modern-day master – one of the must-plays of 2020**

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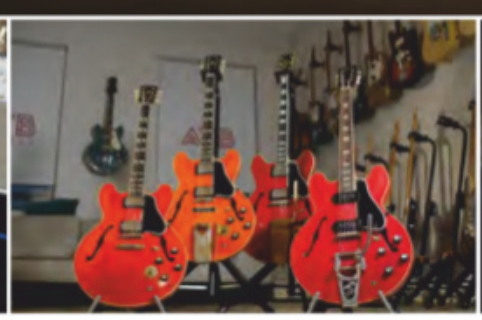

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EASTMAN
SB55DC/V

WORDS HUW PRICE

Though the inspiration is obvious, this new double-cut features some well-considered and interesting twists on the student set-neck theme

Eastman's Antique Varnish models have garnered much praise in these pages in recent years. For 2020, the ranks have swelled, with the range now encompassing a pair of 50s Junior-style solidbodies – the single-cutaway SB55/v and this attractive double-cut model.

African okoume is the choice for the one-piece body and while it may not be considered a genuine mahogany, it certainly looks and sounds the part here. The set neck is also made from a single piece of the African hardwood and it's reinforced by a single action truss-rod.

As one of the world's largest violin makers, Eastman has the buying power to access high-quality materials. It ought to be no surprise, then, that the SB55's ebony fretboard is uniformly black, with no visible grain. There's also a matching ebony peghead veneer with a pearl inlaid logo, impressive fretboard inlay work and a very well-made Bakelite tortoiseshell pickguard.

The hardware is a mixture of Asian and European parts. The strap buttons are aged Gotoh units and, rather than the three-on-a-plate tuners with plastic buttons you'd find on an old Junior, here you'll find individual Faber units with metal buttons, again factory aged. The locking Faber bridge is made from aluminium and offers the best of both worlds, with wrapover stringing and compensation for plain G string sets.

The Antique Varnish finish has a faded cherry hue with a lightly aged appearance. It's French polished and therefore hand-rubbed rather than sprayed, so the look and feel is unlike that of nitrocellulose or polyurethane. As there's no grain filling, it's not quite completely smooth and feels slightly gritty in some areas.

The area around the heel looks a little scruffy upon close examination but it's certainly not a deal-breaker, and the neck profile is far less likely to polarise opinion than the finish. The carve feels like a perfect late 1950s Gibson example, combining depth with soft shoulders for supreme comfort, and the fretwork is just as good. Time to give it a spin.

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £1,239 (inc hard case)
DESCRIPTION Solidbody electric guitar, made in China
BUILD One-piece okoume body, set okoume neck, ebony fretboard with 12" radius, 22 Jescar 47104-P frets, bone nut, custom Bakelite scratchplate
HARDWARE Faber compensated wrapover aluminium bridge, Faber vintage-style tuners, Gotoh strap buttons
ELECTRONICS Lollar Dog Ear P-90, master volume, no-load tone control
SCALE LENGTH 24.75"/629mm
NECK WIDTH 43.4mm at nut, 53.2mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 22mm at first fret, 24.4mm at 12th fret
STRING SPACING 35.9mm at nut, 50.7mm at bridge
WEIGHT 2.84kg/6.26lb
FINISH Antique Varnish
CONTACT eastmanguitars.com

That's a wrap: the SB55 features a compensated Faber bridge

Top drawer: the high-quality ebony fretboard features no visible grain

Rock of ages: rather than three-on-a-plate tuners, the SB55 has individual factory-aged Faber units

IN USE

The SB55's unplugged tone isn't appreciably different to that of our 1955 Les Paul Special, which also has a Faber bridge. The Eastman is light and extremely resonant, and has all the sustain you could wish for. We can certainly hear why okoume has been used for PRS Private Stock and Fender Custom Shop models over the past few years.

With our playability and unplugged tone tests passed with flying colours, we plug into our trusty tweed Deluxe and let rip. Eastman has opted for a no-load tone potentiometer, which extends the frequency response a little higher than would otherwise be the case with a wax-potted P-90.

Although the Lollar Dog Ear doesn't quite deliver all of the growl, dynamics and detail of a vintage Gibson P-90, it's a very decent-sounding pickup. With the tone control activated, we get the full midrange, biting upper mids and snarling lows that you'd hope for from a single-pickup guitar of this type. No-load mode adds an extra layer of stinging treble and chime, pushing the SB55 towards a fat 1950s Broadcaster tone.

There's juicy rock and Americana in spades, along with hollower, almost acoustic textures when you roll back the volume. Minor finish imperfections aside, this is a superb guitar that easily holds its own with substantially more expensive boutique competitors.

8/10 **Looking for an affordable vintage-style Junior? This ticks the boxes with aplomb**

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JOE DOE BY VINTAGE
JAILBIRD

WORDS RICHARD PURVIS

Indie spirit meets mainstream muscle in this quirky collaboration between Joe Doe Guitars and John Hornby Skewes. But is the Jailbird good enough to be a breakout hit?

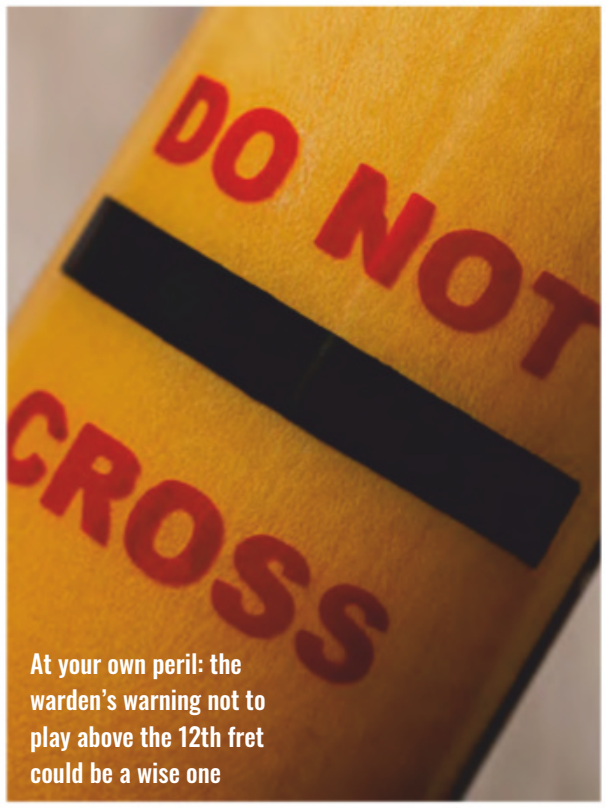
Joe Doe is the alter ego of Brighton-based film and TV screenwriter Ben Court, whose sideline interests involve making distinctive guitars, each with a cinematic backstory. But Ben's one-man operation means small production numbers and not-so-small prices. That's where John Hornby Skewes comes in.

Having teamed up with the powerhouse behind the Vintage brand, Ben is now able to apply his unique vision to a range of guitars produced in Asia on a much larger scale and at much more tempting prices. Among the first fruits of this deal is the Jailbird, limited to a run of 100 instruments.

This is a guitar with a fascinating provenance – and for once you don't have to fret about whether all of it is true, because you know none of it is. The tall tale concerns a kindly prison warden who believed music was the key to rehabilitation, and encouraged his prisoners not only to listen to music but to build their own instruments in the prison workshop. This guitar was supposedly built by an incarcerated arsonist, who kicked off a blues-inspired riot when, at one of the annual open-doors performance days, he thrashed out hot licks through a distorted amp, which saw the warden ban notes north of the 12th fret.

You can enjoy the whole story on the JHS website. Failing that, you can simply relish the clever graphical flourishes on the guitar itself, which look to evoke the intimidating atmosphere of the Ohio State Penitentiary circa 1967, and do so quite successfully.

In fact, the only thing that doesn't quite fit the story is the Jailbird's most striking feature: its novel oval scratchplate. We don't mind that though, because it looks great. Unusual pickguard aside, this guitar appears to be a straightforward T-type, and this is confirmed by a decal at the tip of the headstock that reads, 'Built on a Vintage V52 chassis'. It's nice to know, though the decal's placement here does detract ever so slightly from the instrument's evocative Midwest prison vibe, and it's a shame they didn't stick it around the back.



At your own peril: the warden's warning not to play above the 12th fret could be a wise one

If you're thinking this looks more like an Esquire than a Telecaster, think again; there's a 'secret' neck pickup under that 'guard. The paperwork claims it's a hot humbucker but what's actually fitted in there is a skinny single-coil – maybe the cost of routing out the standard Vintage body for anything bigger turned out to be impractical. It's a pity, and we wonder how well this unit – which has a DC resistance reading of less than 7k ohms – will manage to make itself heard from back there.

The alder body is described as 'light' but our review instrument is distinctly heavier than average for its type. Mind you, much of that may be down to the neck, which is a chunky piece of hard rock maple that pulls down insistently on the strap. It's topped by a fretboard made of Lignum Rosa – a wood-based material that Vintage has been using as a rosewood alternative since the CITES restrictions were tightened in 2017 – with 22 frets and prison-themed marker inlays.

The Wilkinson bridge has three compensated brass saddles for retro tones with modern intonation accuracy, while the knobs and pickup switch are lined up as they would be on a normal Tele's control plate, except with the switch at the back, which has the advantage of bringing the volume control closer to the strings for pinkie swells.

Given that this guitar was supposedly built in a prison workshop, does that excuse some dubious finishing? There's a warning on the back of the neck not to play higher than the 12th fret, which is meant as a joke, but given the roughness of some of the ends up there, we're inclined to heed it; the hidden pickup seems to be pushing the scratchplate a good millimetre clear of the body on the treble side; the painted-on binding is quite untidy around the neck join; and, if we're going in close, it looks a little sloppy that countersink screws have been used to secure the pickup switch against the flat body.

Deadly weapon: the Jailbird is definitely not a blunt instrument, with plenty of spanky aggression available from the bridge pickup

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £599 (inc hard case)
DESCRIPTION Solidbody single-cutaway electric guitar, made in China
BUILD Alder body, bolt-on maple neck, 9.5" radius Lignum Rosa fingerboard with 22 medium frets and Graph Tech nut
HARDWARE Wilkinson vintage-style tuners, Wilkinson T-style bridge with three compensated brass saddles
ELECTRICS 2x custom-designed Joe Doe single-coil pickups, master volume and tone, three-way switch
SCALE LENGTH 25.5"/648mm
NECK WIDTH 42.8mm at nut, 52.6mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 22.5mm at first fret, 24.3mm at 12th fret
STRING SPACING 35.5mm at nut, 54mm at bridge
WEIGHT 3.7kg/8.2lb
FINISH Red only
LEFT-HANDERS No
CONTACT jhs.co.uk, joedoeguitars.com

IN USE

For this test we'll be using a US-made Telecaster – a trusty workhorse that's neither vintage nor Vintage – as our reference point. In acoustic tone, there's little to choose between the two guitars, though the Jailbird comes across slightly dry and lacking in natural warmth next to the cuddly Fender.

When we plug in, we find that the Joe Doe bridge pickup only accentuates that difference: it sounds like a T-type alright, with no shortage of spanky aggression,

Throw away the key: the Lignum Rosa 'board boasts quirky prison-themed inlays

but the bottom end is distinctly lightweight and the emphasis is on the upper midrange. That's not necessarily bad news, especially if you're after a guitar that'll cut through a band mix and don't care about full-range strumming tones.

If you're looking for a guitar that definitely *won't* cut through a band mix, look no further than the Jailbird's neck pickup. It sounds pleasant enough but, as we feared, it's very quiet – a rough match in output for the bridge pickup at half volume.

This is disappointing but, again, some players might not mind: if you only ever use the neck position for low-in-the-mix rhythm work, the pickup switch here effectively becomes a powerful booster to engage the much louder bridge unit for your spotlight moments.

At least the imbalance between the two pickups has no adverse effect on the middle position. The lack of low-end oomph is still noticeable here but it's a likeable sound with lots of cluck, ideal for clean arpeggios and chiming chords. That midrange-focused voice means it can take an awful lot of overdrive without the low end getting congested too: when there's crunch involved, light becomes tight, and at mid-gain settings in the middle or bridge position, this guitar sounds almost like our Tele running through a Tube Screamer.

We all need some fantasy to cheer us up in these troubled times and, if nothing else, the Jailbird's imaginative story will make it a real conversation-starter. Without that fun origin story, however, this would likely be a pretty unremarkable Tele-type with less than stellar build quality. But it certainly has the attitude to match its hard-bitten backstory, and there is enough going on here to suggest that the Joe Doe and Vintage collaboration has real potential.

7/10 **A workmanlike T-type with talking-point looks and (mostly) cutting tones**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Fender Player Telecaster **£599**
G&L Tribute ASAT Classic **£479**
Reverend Greg Koch Gristlemaster **£1,299**

TAYLOR

AMERICAN DREAM AD27 & AD17 BLACKTOP

EDITOR'S CHOICE

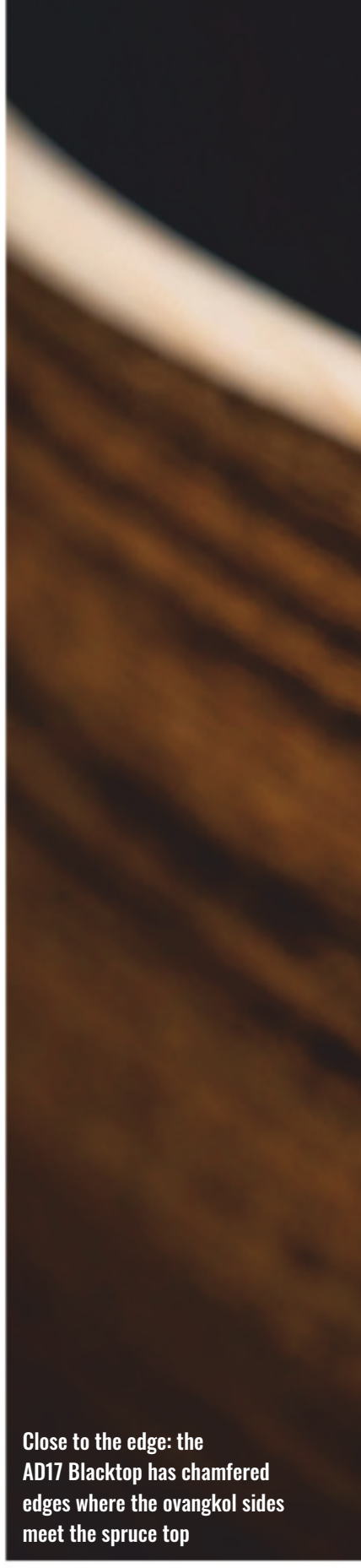
WORDS MICHAEL WATTS

Taylor returns with new US-made Grand Pacific instruments, crafted in the face of adversity and named after its very first workshop

When Taylor's master guitar designer Andy Powers accepted the offer to guide the company into a bold new era, there was no way he could have factored a world-altering pandemic into his plans. Much like guitar builders – and everyone else – the world over, Taylor Guitars has been heavily disrupted by recent events.

With any kind of production a daunting prospect, Andy and Bob Taylor together designed a new line built in the El Cajon factory in Southern California. Taking their name from the workshop that Bob bought with company co-founder Kurt Listug in 1974, the first American Dream models are all V-Class braced Grand Pacific instruments, but other body styles may arrive the future.

Dark horse: the AD27's tortoiseshell scratchplate sits beautifully atop its tropical mahogany soundboard



Close to the edge: the AD17 Blacktop has chamfered edges where the ovangkol sides meet the spruce top

The Taylor Grand Pacific was an original Andy Powers design based around V-Class architecture. Essentially a slope-shouldered dreadnought, it's gaining a reputation as a versatile, warm-voiced instrument that fits wherever you might see a larger body guitar.

As Powers explained in a recent exclusive chat with *Guitar.com*: "I'm not always a big fan of the plosive effect that you get out of a dreadnought. It's like a singer who needs a pop shield in front of a studio mic. I wanted the power of a larger body with a broad waist but I needed to filter out that explosive response so that it's more of a musical syllable – a low note rather than a pop."

Our review guitars comprise the striking AD17 Blacktop in ovangkol and spruce, and the AD27, an interesting variation on the theme of a Depression-era instrument with a mahogany soundboard over sapele back and sides. Although these early examples feature ebony bridges and fingerboards, Taylor will soon be moving to fumed eucalyptus, which Powers describes as being visually and functionally very similar. Interesting.

Aesthetically, these guitars are stark, with little decoration, but that doesn't mean the American Dream Series isn't visually attractive. The stripped-back street-fighter vibe is actually very appealing.

There's no binding. Instead, the body edges are chamfered, which is especially effective on the AD17 Blacktop. A look inside reveals that the sides are lined rather than kerfed and, on the outside, the mirror-flat pristine sheen synonymous with Taylor is nowhere to be seen. Instead, a combination of unfilled pores and a super-thin water-based finish gives these instruments an organic, wild-wood feel.

Speaking of wood, both guitars exhibit aesthetic imperfections – or character, depending on how you look at it – that you might not associate with Taylor either. However, as Bob himself proved definitively with his Pallet Guitar in 1995, the sound of a Taylor instrument can be pulled out of any woods the company chooses, with construction techniques being just as vital as materials used.

Material difference: our American Dream models feature ebony bridges and fretboards but Taylor is soon to make the switch to eucalyptus

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GRAND PACIFIC

Stay tuned: both guitars have character in abundance and are enormous fun to play

While both our review guitars are purely acoustic, all models in the American Dream range are also available with Expression System 2 electronics, and the guitars come in superb heavy duty Taylor gigbags.

IN USE

At the beginning of our playing session, the first thing we notice is that these guitars are not strung with Taylor's usual Elixir strings, which is a slight jolt to the system. However, both instruments feel lively, well-balanced and ready for action.

The lightweight AD27 has an open and musical sound, with much of the immediacy and fundamental character you'd associate with an all-mahogany guitar. There's a beautiful dry shimmer to the top end, and impressive sustain, attributable in no small part to the V-Class bracing.

The guitar handles fingerstyle well but the response with a flatpick is variable. It can be very breathy and expressive when gently supporting vocals but the high-end response struggles when you approach the guitar with a heavier pick, with notes often losing their body and punch. That said, anybody planning to subject a mahogany-top guitar to a life of open G runs with a BlueChip 80 might need a rethink anyway.

In contrast, the ovangkol and spruce AD17 has a much punchier voice with an aggressive, slightly nasal midrange that, though it may soften over time, makes this guitar better for flatpicking than fingerstyle in standard tuning. The bass response feels a little constricted, while the trebles remain fat right up the fretboard, albeit with the slightly metallic front end to the notes that's typical of Sitka spruce and its variants.

However, there's a marked contrast when we drop the guitar into DADGAD, as the AD17 comes alive with a muscular and articulate low end that wasn't even hinted at in standard tuning. It's a powerful, modern voice that works as well for Michael Hedges-style meanderings as it does for Americana murder ballads.

While both of these guitars have an organic and earthy charm, it's worth noting that the finish can create extraneous noise. Body rubs, scrapes and swooshes are a fact of life with many satin-finished instruments but you may also experience rubbing noises on the back of the neck.

It's not a significant issue in a band arrangement, of course, but solo players may find it slightly distracting during quieter moments. That aside, the American Dream playing experience is typical Taylor: smooth, fast and intuitive with a beautifully judged neck carve, slinky action and excellent fretwork.

Rather like the acoustic equivalent of a Les Paul Junior, Taylor's American Dream guitars may not immediately appeal to dyed-in-the-wool Presentation Series fans. And, even though our review instruments represent a serious amount of guitar for the money, any US-made Taylor model is a significant investment. However, both American Dream models offer an abundance of sonic and aesthetic character and, perhaps most importantly, are enormous fun to play. G

KEY FEATURES

TAYLOR AMERICAN DREAM AD27
PRICE £1,619 (inc deluxe gigbag)
DESCRIPTION 6-string acoustic guitar, made in the USA
BUILD Sapele back and sides, tropical mahogany soundboard, tropical mahogany neck, 20 frets, ebony bridge and fingerboard (soon to be replaced with fumed eucalyptus), Tusq nut, Micarta saddle
HARDWARE Taylor nickel sealed tuners
ELECTRONICS None – AD27e with ES2 system is £1,835
SCALE LENGTH 25.5"/648mm
NECK WIDTH 44.5mm at nut, 54.8mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 22mm at first fret, 24.9mm at 10th fret
STRING SPACING 38.6mm at nut, 56.6mm at bridge
WEIGHT 1.58kg/3.48lb
FINISH Water-based matte
LEFT-HANDERS No
CONTACT taylorguitars.com

8/10 **An engaging take on the all-mahogany theme, with an open and musical sound**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Martin DSS-15M StreetMaster **£1,499**
Eastman E10SS/v **£1,399**
Guild D-20 **£1,399**

KEY FEATURES

TAYLOR AMERICAN DREAM AD17 BLACKTOP
PRICE £1,715 (inc deluxe gigbag)
DESCRIPTION 6-string acoustic guitar, made in the USA
BUILD Ovangkol back and sides, spruce soundboard, tropical mahogany neck, 20 frets, ebony bridge and fingerboard (soon to be replaced with fumed eucalyptus), Tusq nut, Micarta saddle
HARDWARE Taylor nickel sealed tuners
ELECTRONICS None – AD17e with ES2 system is £1,919
SCALE LENGTH 25.5"/648mm
NECK WIDTH 44.5mm at nut, 54.8mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 22mm at first fret, 24.9mm at 10th fret
STRING SPACING 38.6mm at nut, 56.6mm at bridge
WEIGHT 1.81kg/3.99lb
FINISH Water-based matte
LEFT-HANDERS No

9/10 **An exuberant flatpicker with a fantastically moody aesthetic**

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Martin DSS-17 Black Smoke **£1,669**
Atkin J43 Aged Nitro **£2,899**

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„The guitar itself is a very nicely made tool that might well be all you need, with some additional pickups, to fulfil all your gigging, recording and practice needs." Reviewed by Guitarist Magazine

Guitarist

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We catch up with Taylor's master guitar designer Andy Powers to find out more about the American Dream Series

CALIFORNIA DREAMIN'

How did Taylor manage to deal with the shock of a world thrust into lockdown?

"Taylor Guitars was founded on adversity! It's a little-known fact that, on the very first day of Taylor Guitars' official business – the first real working day, in 1974 – the workshop flooded. Bob Taylor and Kurt Lustig showed up ready to get started with their brand-new guitar business and found it knee-deep in water.

"They spent the entire day picking up piles of soggy sawdust and trying to keep machines from rusting. That's the sort of stuff that we're made of. It gives us that strength to look at a challenging time and want to make something better.

"One of the beautiful things I've been watching come out of this time is an interest in returning to self-made music. People are redirecting their attention into creativity, into self-expression, and they're interested in playing guitar even if it's just three chords. I wouldn't wish this amount of disruption on the world ever again but if we're looking for silver linings, that seems like a pretty good one.

"Taylor has two factories, one in El Cajon and the other in Mexico. If you were to drive from one to the other, it would take you about 45 minutes but, because there is an international border between them, it means that there's a completely different set of regulations governing what can and can't be done in one and the other, and that has made this pandemic particularly challenging. Our workshops rely on each other for parts, each one has different tools, different processes. It's a symbiotic relationship. Our production literally ground to a halt.

"Bob and I thought, 'Okay, we don't know what tomorrow looks like but what can we do right now to make it a little better than today, because today is not super-fun?!' So we set in motion the types of things that we could with the limited resources we had available to us. We both have workshops at home, so we'd be at the factory during the day and then working at home at night on this project."

Guitars built in difficult times are well known for their stripped-down aesthetics and often superb sound. Do you feel like the American Dream Series is Taylor's equivalent to historic models by Gibson and Martin?

"The challenges that we have encountered recently have led to what we're calling the American Dream Series, which features guitars named after the first Taylor workshop. It seemed obvious to us that these guitars were something we could make during these uncertain times, rather than just throwing our hands up, waving a white flag in the air and going and hiding, which was a real strong temptation!

"These guitars are intended for musicians who are facing many of the same difficulties as us. Many players are now re-evaluating their needs. This isn't really the time for filigree and ornamentation and the most unobtainable exotic woods. This is almost like a return to the Depression era and, as we all know, plenty of really fantastic guitars came out of the Depression era.

"You know, I had a lot of older relatives who lived through the Depression, the wars of the 20th century, pandemics, shortages, economic collapses and all kinds of calamities and survived. Each of those people had a strength to them that was inspiring, and that never leaves you."

The first American Dream models are all based around the Grand Pacific body style. Could others be on the way?

"That's right. For now, they're all the Grand Pacific shape but I can imagine a future where we introduce other shapes. We launched the Grand Pacific just two years ago and it's been such a popular model. My dad was a carpenter by trade and he was looking for work songs to accompany his working day – old-time bluegrass, folk music, country. It's very dear to my heart because I grew up listening to music with that warmer, woodier sound.

"The irony with these is that we started building them thinking that it might just be a temporary thing. But we like the guitars so much we've decided to make them a permanent part of our line-up. They really are fun instruments to play, so let's just keep making them. They have a place in the world – that musical need is not disappearing."

Was there any temptation to return to a more traditional bracing pattern for these guitars?

"We wanted to continue building on the V-Class architecture. We had the tools to do that. We know it works well. More importantly though, we love the way that it works with our guitars because it offers such a musical response, as well as being stable and strong in different climates. It suits almost anyone who picks it up.

"The finish is unique for these guitars. We typically spend a lot of time doing ultra-perfect finishes where everything is polished out to a pristine lustre. These guitars needed a different approach, where you'd get more of a connection with the wood's natural character.

We used a modern water-based environmentally friendly finish that is ultra-thin and behaves a lot like old nitrocellulose lacquer that has sunk into the wood over the decades. You'll feel a lot more texture on these guitars than any other Taylor, and the sonic response is very open and organic."

What about the choice of wood?

"We are using a select collection of woods at the moment but we'll be introducing others as we go along. Right now we're using ovangkol, as well as sapele and mahogany.

"We chose woods that we knew sounded great but in some cases had been harder and took more time to work with. But with these guitars, we had nothing but time, so off we went.

"The soundboards are Sitka or Lutz spruce. You know, it's increasingly rare to see pure Sitka these days and, typically, what you're seeing is a hybrid of Sitka and white spruce, ie Lutz. What's fascinating to me is that the hybrid mix is not 50/50. It varies based on elevation and rain pattern, so you'll find some soundboards that are more like Sitka and some that are more like white spruce. At a certain point, the designated species becomes a little less cut and dried.

"Most of the time in our production, we are looking for pieces of wood that are utterly pristine. Here, we relaxed and allowed ourselves the chance to work with orphaned sets that sounded amazing but weren't necessarily presentation-grade. It's wood with a little more character.

"When someone looks at one of our guitars, I would rather they think, 'That sounds great' than, 'I wonder what woods it's made out of'. I want them to look at their guitar and simply see it as a guitar. It's for playing songs.

"With every one of these design decisions and the way we have assembled these guitars, the guiding philosophy has been to approach this instrument as an intrinsic object, not as a sum of its specifications. Our approach leans very heavily on the function of that instrument.

"We look at hard work as a wonderful and noble thing. That's what we're called to do. To that end, we want to serve every Taylor player very well. The song is the thing, and right now we need shared songs more than ever." G

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FENDER
MUSTANG GTX100

WORDS RICHARD PURVIS

Fender has set out to raise its digital modelling game with this 100-watt evolution of the Mustang amp line – but does it have the tone to match its impressive line-up of emulations?

There's an arms race going on in the world of digital modelling combos, and the Mustang GTX100 is Fender's latest long-range weapon, a 100-watter with more amps and effects to choose from than ever, and a new custom-designed 12-inch Celestion speaker.

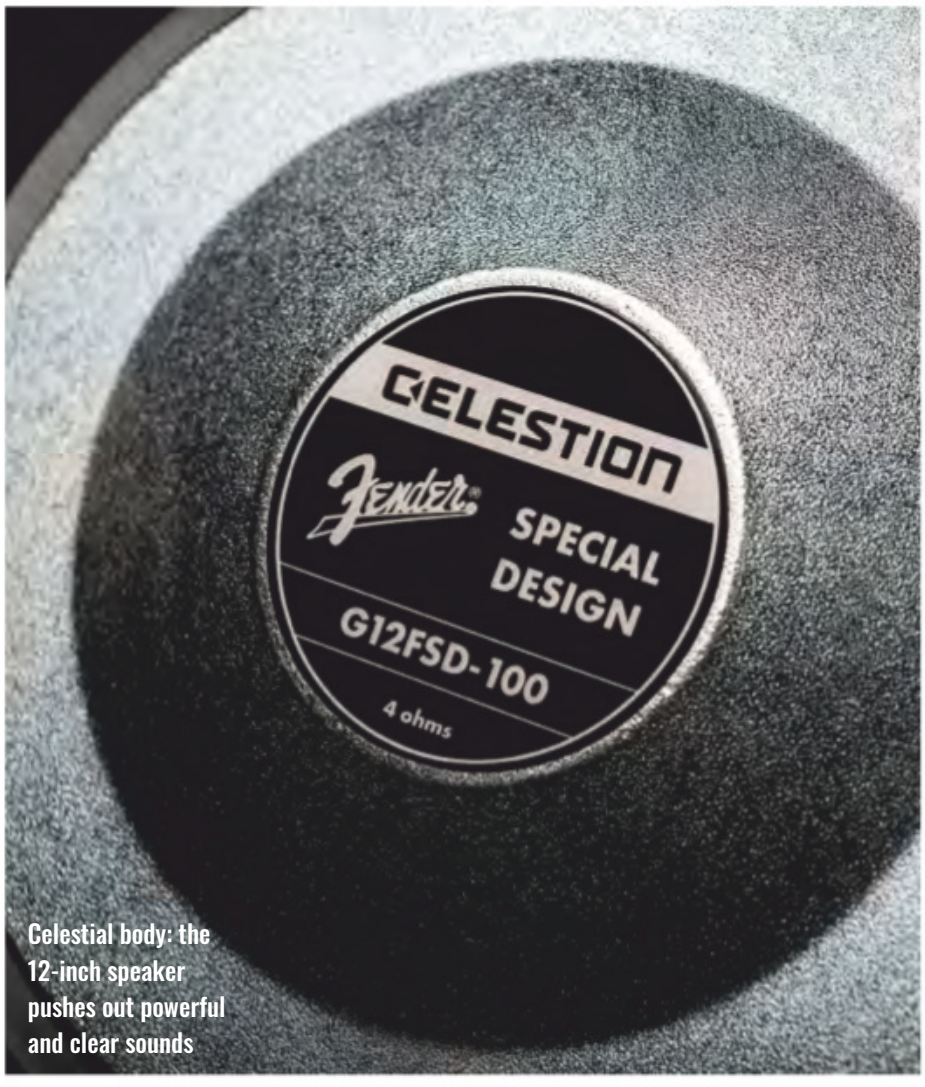
Fender has been making its Mustang range of digital amps for 10 years now. This is a product category that's always been wildly divisive but there's no denying the technology is improving all the time, and the selection of models on offer here – 39 amps, 33 cabs, more than 70 effects, almost 200 factory presets – makes for an appetising proposition.

That's especially true when you consider that the GTX-7 foot controller is included in the price (which is not the case if you opt for the 50-watt version). But who needs a footswitch anyway? The free Fender Tone app lets you connect an iOS or Android device to the amp via Bluetooth for easy preset-hopping and even more in-depth editing of sounds.

Don't worry, there is a control panel on the amplifier itself too, and it includes a full-colour LCD screen for access to all the GTX100's features with no accessories required. We can't see ourselves spending much time here though. Push-button navigation is a faff and, with the amp sitting on an angled stand, peering over to look at the recessed panel can be an awkward stretch.

What are those features? Beyond the aforementioned cornucopia of preset sounds, there's a 60-second looper (you will want to use the footswitch for that), an in-built tuner, wifi for downloading new sounds directly into the amp, and a Setlist option for organising presets into your own themed groups.

Flying colours: the GTX100's full-colour LCD screen provides a handy visual reference



Celestial body: the 12-inch speaker pushes out powerful and clear sounds

Two's company: the effects loop and line-out sockets can be used in stereo as well as mono

There are effects loop and XLR line-out sockets on the back, which can be used in mono or stereo, plus a microUSB output for direct recording. Why does a one-speaker combo have stereo outputs? Some of the onboard delays and reverbs can work in stereo as long as you add them to the post section of your virtual rig, and you'll hear that through the stereo outs as well as the headphone port. It's just a pity there's no external cab output for room-filling stereo self-indulgence.

The amp is made in China and is light enough to be a practical option for even the scrawniest teenager. That's not to say it doesn't feel solid though, and the inclusion of Velcro straps in the bottom for securing the footswitch in transit is a neat touch.

IN USE

The Fender Twin Reverb of the mid-1960s is a fantastic all-purpose amp that plays well with pedals, so it's no surprise that it's been picked as the platform for preset number one. A compact 1x12 combo is never going to imitate a 2x12 tube behemoth with much accuracy but our starting tone is a solid black-panel sound with lots of power and impressive clarity – at least, it is once we've switched off the crude one-knob compressor and the over-eager reverb.

For slight tweaks to EQ and gain, you're better off with the real-life knobs on the top of the amp than anything virtual but it's simple enough to shake things up via the app, with a diverse range of sounds.

On your feet: the GTX-7 controller is included in the price of this 100-watter

Change your tune: tweaking your EQ is easier via the control panel

Set it right: the Setlist function lets you arrange presets into user-defined groups

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £449
DESCRIPTION Digital modelling combo with 39 amp models and 73 effects, made in China
POWER RATING 100W
CONTROL PANEL Guitar input; volume, treble, middle, bass, reverb, master volume; colour LCD screen with three navigation buttons and encoder wheel; effects bypass, menu, save and tap tempo buttons; aux in and headphone out mini-jacks
REAR PANEL Power switch, footswitch input, microUSB output, line-out left and right XLR, effects loop left and right send and return
SPEAKERS 1x12" Celestion G12FSD-100
DIMENSIONS 533 x 457 x 254mm
WEIGHT 10kg/22lb
ACCESSORIES GTX-7 footswitch included
CONTACT fender.com

The first 40-odd factory presets are mostly quite effects-laden, which makes for a handy introduction to the breadth of the GTX100's talents but might leave you pining to hear something simple and dry. Luckily, the FX button bypasses them all with one press, and things get less showy further down the list.

After a run of 13 effects-free Fender tones covering the brand's uniquely diverse history, we go through assorted classics and non-classics from both sides of the pond, followed by a small metal selection, then a number of single-pedal settings all using that Twin Reverb as their base. After that, it gets a tad chaotic. Working your way through the 189 presets (you can edit or save over any you don't like, and there are a further 11 empty slots) is a bit of a magical mystery tour and, of course, with direct updates via wifi, there could be more than that available by the time you read this.

That custom Celestion driver has almost certainly been voiced with Fender tones as a priority but, even so, there are plenty of Marshall, Orange, Hiwatt and even Friedman emulations for fans of British rock tones to scroll through. They all sound properly meaty with or without added drive from the classy and comprehensive pedal section.

What about the Vox AC30, whose chiming voice always seems to be such a challenge to replicate? This version never feels quite like the real thing, and the digital amplifier war against scratchiness at mid-gain settings is apparently still not completely won, but it's not far off.

Fender's user interface may be flexible but it isn't always the most intuitive. It's a shame you can't take a modular approach and scroll through amp models with the same effects; and while the idea of storing setlists is sound, you can't use the footswitch to run through a set unless you've saved it in sequential slots, which possibly defeats the object.

The footswitch is a decent bit of kit though. You can use it to jump between presets in banks of five, turn individual effects on and off, and control the looper. Holding down its mode switch engages the tuner, which is basic but user-friendly.

Finally, the headphone and line outputs are excellent – and in some cases more convincing than the speaker – making this amp just as well suited to late-night shredding and DI recording as it is to the temporarily lost art of playing live.

The inclusion of an aux input, as well as the ability to stream audio from your phone via Bluetooth, means it's also ideal for silent jam-alongs with records and online tuition. It seems odd to say this about something capable of blasting out 100 watts, but the Mustang GTX100 really is a fine little bedroom amp.

8/10 **An impressive modelling combo that's light, loud and packed with convincing amp and pedal emulations**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Boss Katana-100 MkII **£334**
Blackstar Silverline Deluxe **£579**
Marshall Code100 **£339**

THORPYFX

FIELD MARSHAL & THE BUNKER

Guitar EDITOR'S CHOICE

WORDS RICHARD PURVIS

Two of the biggest brains in British pedal-building combine forces once again to create updated versions of a pair of legendary dirt machines

These two pedals represent the most exciting development to date in the ongoing collaboration between Adrian Thorpe, arguably the most respected name on today's UK stompbox scene, and Dan Coggins, who practically brought that scene into existence. The pair have worked together over the past few years but this is the first time ThorpyFX has revisited Coggins' near-mythical Lovetone effects of the 1990s.

If you're aware of the Lovetone legend – and you really should be, because the list of famous players who have used these units stretches from Ed O'Brien, The Edge and Johnny Marr to Kirk Hammett, Jimmy Page and more – then all you really need to know is that the Field Marshal is a newly updated version of the iconic Big Cheese fuzz and The Bunker is based on the equally epochal Brown Source overdrive.

Original examples of both pedals are now ultra-rare and typically sell for daft amounts of money, while the Big Cheese recently earned the honour of a 'faithful and extremely accurate recreation' courtesy of JHS Pedals. Their rebirth in ThorpyFX form, then, with some interesting additions to both circuits, is potentially very good news indeed.

The Lovetone Big Cheese is a hulking great pedal that specialises in thick and throaty fuzz with an aggressive edge. Launched in 1995, the same year as the Z.Vex Fuzz Factory, this orange stomper was one of the first modern examples to offer a voltage-starve gating effect – and we're yet to hear another that does so in quite such a musical manner.

Sauce material: the names of the Field Marshal and Bunker's secondary switches are a nod to their Lovetone forerunners

The Field Marshal nods to its predecessor via its orange metal walls and we're assured that, in terms of circuitry, this is essentially the same pedal, only with more output and less noise. There is one obvious difference though: the four-way rotary tone switch has been replaced by a three-way toggle, with the fourth mode, tonestack bypass, now accessed via a second footswitch. This is effectively a built-in boost, and the balance control lets you adjust its output level.

The pedal that doesn't have 'Marshal' in its name is the one that's meant to sound like a Marshall. As a Plexi-style overdrive, The Bunker is coming into a much more crowded market than the Brown Source ever did. But, if class is permanent, then it certainly has the pedigree to compete.

As with the Field Marshal, the original unit's four-way tone selector has made way for a three-way toggle plus a second footswitch for bypass mode. But there's no control for the boost level here: instead we get a knob marked 'texture', which promises to change the "quality and layering of the clipping" for different flavours of harmonic richness beyond the Brown Source's original low-gain offering.

These are both beautifully made pedals, and they feel almost indestructible. Their matte black finish is a striking and stylish differentiator from the rest of the range, and has the added bonus of making the control-panel text easier to read from a standing position than Thorpy's regular marriage of laser-etched typography and polished steel.

It's a pity that, possibly for legal reasons, the pedals themselves bear no overt references to their Lovetone heritage.

IN USE

As it holds the highest rank in the British Army, the Field Marshal naturally goes first. With an SG and a clean-ish amp at the ready, we begin with all the knobs pointing roughly northwards, and the mode switch in the middle position for slightly scooped mids.

Although the manual describes this as a 'supremely nasty' fuzz, it would be wrong to think of it as a lo-fi rasper: there is a spittiness to the distortion but tonally it's rich and full, with a gravelly roar to big chords that's instantly seductive. Single notes have an elastic quality that hints at the squishy effects available in gated mode, and there are appealing sounds to be found all the way around the tone dial – plus clonky British-voiced variants accessed by switching down to 'mid boost' mode.

The fuzz control can be maxed out for ultra-thickness and compression or pulled right back for a more open sound and, as with some vintage fuzzes, you can also lighten things up dramatically by dialling back the guitar's volume control. Then there's the boost footswitch, which overrides both the tone control and the mode switch to release some midrange-thickening shunt.

Finally, we flip up the switch for the gated stuff – and it's bang-on. You'll know exactly what to expect from this if you're familiar with the Big Cheese-driven Wilco classic *I'm The Man Who Loves You*. It isn't about extreme glitchiness. Rather, with the fuzz knob acting as a threshold control, it's possible to dial in as much 'pinch' as you want, with no worries about abrupt cut-offs.

Bunking up: the texture knob means The Bunker is capable of even more richness than the Brown Source

That makes the Field Marshal easier to live with than some gated fuzzes, as well as being altogether nicer-sounding than most.

We haven't much space left to talk about The Bunker but luckily this one is a simpler proposition: it's just a really good Marshall-in-a-box pedal. Its core character is open and zingy in the top end but ruthlessly tight in the bass, with that oh-so-British snarling midrange very much to the fore – especially if you flip the toggle switch to the down position, which could almost be described as cocked-wah mode.

The middle position is generally best if you're using humbuckers, as it really ups the chiming presence, but it's actually the new texture control that sets this unit apart. Turning it anticlockwise brings an increase in chunkiness and saturation that's unlike what happens when you crank the drive. Between those two controls and the three treble modes, plus the standard tone knob and the nuclear option of the second footswitch, this is about as flexible as Plexi-type stompboxes get.

You can probably tell we're quite keen on both of these pedals. Bear in mind, though, that the Big Cheese and Brown Source were by far the simplest, most restrained effects in the Lovetone range. If Adrian and Dan decide to go after some of the wilder stuff next, things could get scary.

Hot fuzz: the Field Marshal's gated fuzz is more flexible than many others of its type

KEY FEATURES

FIELD MARSHAL
PRICE £189
DESCRIPTION Fuzz pedal, made in UK
CONTROLS Volume, fuzz, tone, balance (boost level); three-way mids/gating toggle switch, bypass and cheese (boost) footswitches
FEATURES True bypass; powered by 9-volt mains supply only
DIMENSIONS 130 x 75 x 56mm

10/10 **Takes an all-time classic fuzz and makes it slightly better**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Old Blood Noise Endeavors Alpha Haunt **£219**
Z.Vex Effects Vexter Series Fuzz Factory **£179**
Walrus Audio Kangra **£179**

KEY FEATURES

THE BUNKER
PRICE £189
DESCRIPTION Overdrive pedal, made in UK
CONTROLS Volume, drive, texture, tone; three-way treble mode toggle switch, bypass and sauce (boost) footswitches
FEATURES True bypass; powered by 9-volt mains supply only
DIMENSIONS 130 x 75 x 56mm
CONTACT thorpyfx.com

9/10 **A Plexi-style overdrive that's as versatile as it is addictive**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Wampler Plexi-Drive Deluxe **£229**
Bogner La Grange **£199**
Friedman BE-OD **£177**

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Guitar EDITOR'S CHOICE

SENNHEISER
WIRELESS DIGITAL XSW-D PEDALBOARD SET & INSTRUMENT BASE SET

WORDS MICHAEL WATTS

In order to deliver an expressive performance, you need to be able to move. Sennheiser's twin solutions are set to give players free rein both on stage and at home

Wireless systems stand or fall on their reliability, sound quality, ease of use and battery life. With the new XS Wireless Digital range, professional audio giant Sennheiser is aiming to bring carefree and cable-free expression to excitable guitarists around the world.

Here, we're checking out two different iterations of the range: the Instrument Base Set and the Pedalboard Set, both based around a slim, lightweight XSW-D transmitter. Features include 2.4GHz digital transmission for worldwide operation, up to five hours of battery life on a single charge, an impressive 75m (250ft) maximum range, an angle-adjustable jack, and the ability to mute from either transmitter or receiver.

The receiver for the Instrument Base Set comes in exactly the same housing as the transmitter, which could make things interesting in the heat of battle. Sennheiser have thoughtfully marked it on the reverse with a sticker depicting an amp, while the transmitter has a guitar icon. While that may do the trick, it's always nice to have a way of differentiating by touch too.

For players looking to adopt a wireless approach on a permanent basis, the Pedalboard Set upgrades the receiver to a rugged pedal that serves as a base station, chromatic tuner and charging unit for the transmitter. Sennheiser also includes a drilling template for pedalboard mounting.

The stompbox features twin outputs, an unbalanced jack for your guitar amp and a balanced XLR, the latter meaning this could also be a great piece of kit for acoustic musicians sending a signal to front of house. The Pedalboard Set comes with a standard DC wall wart that can be configured with any one of a multitude of adapters to suit any country that the touring musician might visit.

IN USE

Having charged both Base Set units using the USB-C cable provided, we pair them with a simultaneous button push and we're off. With the transmitter plugged into an SG, and the jack angled at 90 degrees, everything feels sturdy, although with a Telecaster, the combination of gravity and our tasteful bopping makes the use of the supplied

Freedom of movement: the XS Wireless Digital transmitters have a range of 75 metres

Pedal power: the Pedalboard Set upgrades the receiver to a hardy pedal

Touch base: the pedal is also a base station, tuner and charging unit for the transmitter

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £259 (Base Set), £289 (Pedalboard Set)
DESCRIPTION Instrument wireless system, made in Romania
FEATURES 5-hour battery life, 75m/250ft range, 2.4GHz transmission
ACCESSORIES Belt clip, USB-C charging cable, identification labels, 6.3mm jack extension cable, mains adapter (Pedalboard Set only)
CONTACT sennheiser.com

strap-mounted transmitter clip and extension cable feel like the safest way forward.

At its best, wireless technology need not mean any discernible drop in sound quality and the Sennheiser system handles everything we throw at it very well indeed. Going straight into a tube amp, the performance is excellent.

The range is very good, and in fact the only way we can provoke any sort of drop-out is by situating the amp on the second floor and advancing into the street outside, guitar in hand. With a maximum of four milliseconds of latency, there's never any squashy delayed feeling to the front of the note, and the standard 2.4GHz transmission means an end to worrying about what frequency you're on. Very impressive.

With the Pedalboard Set, we once again pair the transmitter and receiver in just a moment. The screen is not the brightest but the black background makes the tuning information easy to read even outdoors. It's good to know that you can pair more than one transmitter to the pedal too.

When this product line was first floated, the world was a different place, and the health risks associated with stage-diving into a sweaty mosh pit were based on impact damage alone. However, with a combination of rock-solid performance and ease of use, Sennheiser is offering a cable-free freedom that could prove as game-changing to streamers and studio musicians as it will to stage performers when concerts return.

9/10 **High-quality sound and ease of use from a pro-audio legend. The versatility of the Pedalboard Set just about edges it**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Behringer Airplay Guitar ULG10 **£73**
Shure GLXD16 **£389**
Boss WL-60 Wireless Visual **£219**

THE RUNDOWN

THIS MONTH'S BEST NEW GEAR

WORDS JOSH GARDNER

From new guitars that feel old to lil' boutique amps taking on the big boys, here's what's new in the guitar world this month

FENDER VINTERA ROAD WORN '70S TELECASTER DELUXE

1 After their conspicuous absence from the initial line-up when Fender's top-end Mexico guitars were consolidated last year, Fender's Road Worn series is back with a bang. Using the vintage-feeling Vintera models as a base but with improved ageing jobs and some killer nitro-finish options, these look like great guitars, and we can't wait to get our hands on them.
fender.com

GRETSCH G9520E GIN RICKEY

2 Based on Gretsch's popular and fun Jim Dandy parlor acoustic, the Gin Rickey has the same 1930s juke-joint vibes as its predecessor but boasts some teeth courtesy of the wonderfully art deco Deltoluxe acoustic magnetic soundhole pickup, which makes it easy to share your tales o' woe with a wider audience.
gretschguitars.com

STERLING BY MUSIC MAN JARED DINES STINGRAY

3 A signature model created for the popular YouTube guitarist, the Jared Dines Stingray is the first Sterling Stingray to feature a 24-fret fingerboard, while notable features include a 25.5-inch scale and hot-rodded humbuckers, plus dual-concentric knobs and a killswitch. The gold-on-black aesthetic is fine by us too.
sterlingbymusicman.com

PRS CE 24 STANDARD SATIN

5 Created exclusively for European markets, PRS has launched a limited-edition version of its popular CE24 model finished in a super-thin layer of satin nitrocellulose on the body and neck. Available in batches of just 125 for each of the five finish options, it offers all the US-made PRS quality you'd expect from a CE24 but with a more restrained vibe.
prsguitarseurope.com

BLACKSTAR DEBUT 15E

6 Part of a new range of beginner practice amps, the Debut 15E has everything you'll need to start out: a pair of three-inch speakers, 15 watts of solid-state power, onboard delay and the versatility of Blackstar's ISF mid-shaping feature, all wrapped up in a charming blonde-and-oxblood livery. It looks nicer than our first practice amps ever did.
blackstaramps.com

BAD CAT THE PAW

7 Desktop amps have largely been the preserve of the big-hitters since the concept first gained popularity, but Badcat is stepping into the ring with this bijou beauty based on its popular Cub. The Paw features an all-tube preamp and a 60-watt Class D power amp, running through two six-inch speakers. It's also got in-built cab IR for direct recording.
badcatamps.com

FENDER STORIES COLLECTION BRENT MASON TELECASTER

4 Fender's Stories Collection guitars recreate modded instruments that have become synonymous with the guitarists who play them. The latest in the series is for country session maestro Brent Mason, and recreates his modded '67 Tele, complete with red middle single-coil and neck mini-humbucker. It's available with or without a Custom Shop relic job.
fender.com

WAY HUGE GREEN RHINO MKV

8 This latest iteration of Way Huge's classic TS-style boost is squeezed into an even smaller enclosure than before, and also comes with a couple of tweaks to the frequency controls. The two extra small knobs are Freq and Curve, with the former cutting/boosting either 100Hz or 500Hz (set internally) and the latter taming aggressive high end.
jimdunlop.com

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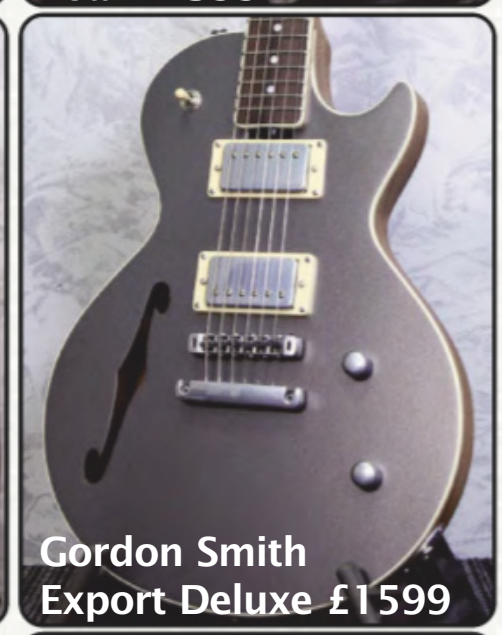
Highlights Of The Month

Atkin L- 36 Custom
Birdseye Maple £3675

Martin 000- 12E
Koa £1399

Auden Colton Artist
Mahogany £1349


Gordon Smith
Export Deluxe £1599

Ortega 8 String
RCE159- 8 £550

Guild Starfire 1
SC £499

ACOUSTICS
Main dealer for Lowden, Atkin, Brook, Sheeran, Patrick James Eggle, Martin, Faith, Auden, Seagull, Fender, Eastman, Aria, Crafter, Maton, Furch, Tanglewood

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INDUSTRY INSIDER

ZANDER CIRCUITRY

INTERVIEW SAM ROBERTS

From building strip-board kits and flogging them via Facebook to developing a respected pedal company with some of the most striking graphics around, it's been a whirlwind four years for Alex Millar

How did you get into guitar?

"I started playing when I was about 12. My parents bought me my first electric guitar, which was a cheap catalogue knock-off of a black Fender Strat. I'm left-handed and my dad was knowledgeable enough to know that guitars were made in both orientations, so my first guitar was a lefty. I've never been to any lessons. Well, I went to one, and the teacher just told me to learn right-handed – we never went back. I taught myself using tab and gradually learnt to pick things up by ear. I dropped it for a few years in my mid-teens but picked it up again as I entered adulthood. I've barely put it down since."

When did you start building or tinkering with effects?

"It all stems from being left-handed really. I was bored with all the offerings available to left-handers in most guitar shops. Instead, I would buy cheap, random parts on eBay and piece together strange guitars just to have something that was a little different. In 2014, I started building some DIY kits and strip-board layout fuzzes and drives, mostly for my own amusement. After a while, I'd built so many that I had to clear a few out on Facebook selling groups, and the response was so good that I decided to put a brand to what I was doing and start a little side venture. I work full-time as a graphic designer on top of Zander, so it also gave me a chance to do some design work for myself."

When did you realise you had a viable business?

"When the company was launched, I built a batch of 10 SiClone fuzzes to put online. When the site went live, we sold out within the first week and, considering we barely had any following on social platforms, this was an incredible achievement for us. We received a lot of positive feedback on them and it pushed us to keep going."

Did you get any external investment starting out?

"None at all. I pretty much started it on a shoestring budget of a few hundred pounds, which was used to purchase a small batch of enclosures, some packs of resistors and capacitors, and a batch of vinyl stickers from a print shop, which is what we used for the graphics back then."

When did you feel like you'd nailed your branding?

"We rebranded on 1 January 2018 with a completely new look that standardised our control layout, illustration style and typography. Prior to that, each of our pedals looked very different. They looked great but they lacked the cohesiveness that many other larger brands have. I took a lot of inspiration from brands such as EarthQuaker Devices in regard to their consistent aesthetic."

How did you come up with your best-selling product?

"Our best-seller has been the Cranium dual-gain distortion pedal. It's based on the ProCo Rat pedal. Many people will be aware of the Rat variants released throughout the years; most of these pedals use a very similar core circuit, and the main difference between them is the type of diode used to clip the signal. I wanted to create something that captured all of those tones in one box, and that's where the Cranium came in.

The ambitious Junipero modulation pedal delivers eight effects, plus much more

The Cranium is more than just a Rat clone thanks to a variety of clipping options

The SiClone runs the gamut from vintage fuzz to absolute chaos

It has various clipping options on a rotary switch, along with lots of other features that make it one of the most versatile Rat-based distortions available today."

What's your proudest moment as a maker?

"We released our multi-modulation pedal, the Junipero, in June. It offers eight effects, combining various takes on chorus, flanger, phaser, tremolo and ring modulation. On top of that, it offers full stereo in/out, tap-tempo with sub-divisions, five onboard presets, MIDI and full expression control, as well as buffered or true bypass that's assignable per preset. As far as I know, we're the first British company to tackle something of this magnitude.

"For this new pedal, we decided we that didn't want to use standard off-the-shelf knobs. We spent a lot of money purchasing custom-made anodised ones and, as we were dealing with a custom part, we had to buy in bulk.

"We waited ages for them to arrive and, when they did, we found that the quality was completely subpar. After a lot of back and forth, the manufacturer told us they were no longer going to reproduce the batch. I decided to put them up on our website at cost price, expecting that they'd just sit there for months and we'd sell a few here and there. But no, the pedal community stepped up and we sold all of them within three weeks. It gave us enough money to purchase another batch from a different supplier, and these are so much better. It made me very proud to be part of a wonderful community of builders and customers that are willing and able to really step up and help us out when we need it."

What's next for Zander Circuitry?

"One of the reasons the Junipero pedal took us so long to make is that we wanted the hardware to have serious longevity for future releases. This means that, in the future, we can bring out a delay, reverb or any other set of effects we want using mostly software changes.

"It just means we don't have to go completely back to the drawing board if we want to do something new. We're also currently in a period of moving all of our 'simpler' pedals, which is pretty much all of our drives and fuzzes, over to a smaller enclosure size.

"Along with this, we're also moving to soft switching, which will allow for momentary and latching modes."

Find out more at zandercircuitry.co.uk

SHOP TALK

DON GROSH
GUITAR MAKER

WORDS DAVE HUNTER

Having grown up riding skateboards and modding BMXs in 1970s SoCal, Don Grosh came of age in the shadow of some of the world's biggest guitar makers. But the key for this respected builder lies in keeping things small

Small-shop guitar makers have been popping up like mushrooms in a dank cellar in recent years. All enthusiastically claim to have learnt their craft by studying the inimitable vintage instruments that have passed through their hands. To be honest, though, unless you're working in the right place at the right time, the average entry-level repairman's exposure to Blackguard Teles, slab-board Strats and '59 Les Pauls is likely to be pretty minimal. But a job with one of LA's hottest custom guitar makers of the mid-to-late 1980s? Yeah, you could call that the right place at the right time.

That's exactly where Don Grosh learnt his craft. Some 35 years since he took up the trade, Don and his eponymous Grosh Guitars are long resettled in the more pastoral location of Broomfield, Colorado, on the edge of the Rocky Mountains a few miles north of Denver. It's here that a rigorous drive to maintain standards and consistency, and a constant appreciation of the lessons learnt in that LA hot seat, continues to help his team of five turn out some of the best-respected boutique electrics available today.

SOCAL STATE OF MIND

Grosh was born in 1961 in Glendale, California. His family moved to the Santa Clarita Valley, where he grew up, two years later. "I have two older brothers and a younger brother," says Don, "so I was influenced by the music they were listening to. My oldest brother, Bill, was a keyboard player, and Glen was playing acoustic guitar. That made me to want to learn. But I didn't start playing guitar until I was 19."

Regular readers will have noticed a common thread: guitar, amp and pedal makers raised by parents who used their hands to make a living, and who themselves learnt woodworking, metalworking, and other trades at a young age. Grosh fits the bill entirely – in fact, he was practically made to make stuff.

"At that time, I was into building stuff," he says, "making things out of wood. I worked at my dad's machine shop in the summers. I started when I was 13. Then the whole skateboard craze was happening in California, so I started making my own boards.

“I STARTED IN A LOW-LEVEL POSITION IN THE REPAIR SHOP, THEN I STARTED BUILDING SOME GUITARS. IT WAS GREAT. I WAS ABLE TO JUMP RIGHT IN BECAUSE I’D ALREADY HAD A LITTLE EXPERIENCE”

I had a little skateboard company called Sun Boards, and I was selling wood boards to friends. At about the same time, the BMX craze was starting and my friends and I began fabricating our own bikes. I’d learnt how to weld at my dad’s shop, and for my 13th birthday I asked for an arc welder!”

Once playing the guitar became an obsession for Don, it was inevitable that he would begin building them too, and build he did. Having made several instruments – while also repairing guitars for friends, glueing fractured headstocks, cutting out replacement bodies and more – he was still making good money from his day job, working for a contractor building custom cabinets. But then a 1985 issue of *Guitar Player* magazine came out with Steve Lukather on the cover and everything changed.

“I saw that Lukather was playing a Valley Arts guitar on the cover,” says Grosh. “I didn’t know anything about Valley Arts but I knew they were in Studio City, which was pretty close to me. So, I thought, ‘Man, I’d love to make guitars for my job!’”

With three of his homebrew guitars in hand, Grosh headed over to Valley Arts and applied for a job. The call-back came a month later: “Mr. Grosh? You’re hired!”

STAR POWER

Valley Arts Guitars was founded by Mike McGuire and Al Carness in the mid-1970s. By the time Grosh joined the team about a decade later – well before the sale of the brand name to Samick, and then more recently to Gibson – it had become known as the premier custom-guitar maker and pro shop in the Los Angeles area. First-call session aces such as Larry Carlton, Lee Ritenour and Tommy Tedesco were among shop’s the devoted clientele, as well as such stars as Lukather, Robben Ford, Mitch Holder, Duane Eddy and dozens of others.

“I started in a low-level position in the repair shop,” says Grosh, “then I started building some guitars. It was great. I was able to jump right in because I’d already had a little experience with my own stuff, so I was able to learn what they were doing, and I learnt a lot more being there. In a few years, I was managing the guitar shop there, and then I opened a separate facility just for production, where I was the production supervisor.”

Perhaps the biggest benefit in the entire gig, though, was the access to top-notch vintage guitars that Grosh received as part of the position. It’s the kind of apprenticeship you just can’t pay for, and the best possible grounding for an aspiring guitar maker.

“Because of all the pro players coming through that shop,” says Grosh, “there were so many incredible guitars, like vintage Fenders, vintage Gibsons. To see the positive sides of those guitars, and some of the negatives, was a great experience that I never would have got if I had started on my own from scratch.

As far as getting my work really dialled in, that was what helped me. Working with pro players in that way helped me fine-tune everything that I do. Those were the real building blocks."

STICKING TO THE RECIPE

After seven years at Valley Arts, Grosh set out on his own in 1993 to build guitars in southern California under his own name. Although he would later design a highly regarded Les Paul-inspired model, known as the Set Neck, Grosh has always been best known for his Fender-inspired bolt-neck models, a speciality that, he tells us, was born out of the old write-what-you-know edict.

"I was more of a Fender player," he says. "I had a few Gibsons. I owned a Les Paul Black Beauty and I had a ES-335, and a few different odd pieces. But, for whatever reason, I was drawn more toward the 25.5-inch scale guitars for what I liked to play myself. That's what I was interested in, so that's why I also gravitated more towards those designs when it came to my own building."

Where many young small-shop builders will find their formulae continually evolving as they gain experience in the field, Grosh's invaluable time repairing top-shelf vintage instruments and building new custom guitars for the most demanding players on the professional circuit enabled him to work out the kinks in the process before he'd even put his own name on the headstocks. In short, Grosh was getting things right from the very start. Few builders' products have changed as little as his have.

"It's interesting," he says. "Last year was our 25th anniversary. We've been doing this for 25 years and, I have to say, as far as what we do goes, what started out as our original Retro Classic guitar and the Tele version of that has barely changed since then. I have customers now who have owned their guitars for 20 years, even pushing 25 years, who have bought our newer guitars recently, and the comment I always get is, 'The neck feels exactly the same as the guitar I've been playing for 20 years'.

"For me, the original formula is having a guitar that's really resonant, really alive acoustically, because that's what's going to translate through the amp, and the pickups will only pick up what's resonating through the guitar. It's not 100 per cent about the pickups. That's a good portion of what you're getting but the whole foundation of what's going to happen is the resonance of the guitar and the way it vibrates.

ABOVE In-house pickup winding gives Grosh more control over his guitars' tone, and command over his parts supply

FACING PAGE Grosh's biggest sellers are the company's vintage-style bolt-on models

ABOVE This custom ElectraJet VT with a reverse headstock and Boneshakers logo was made for Grosh artist Randy Jacobs

ABOVE RIGHT Don applying a finish in the spray booth

FACING PAGE A member of Grosh's small team levelling frets

"There are a handful of things we've changed: our neck design, our headstock thickness, a little bit more mass in front of the nut of our necks, how we pick out the woods for the bodies and the necks – all that contributes to that foundation. From there, it's the feel of the neck, the shape of the neck, how we roll the fingerboard edges so it's really comfortable. You know, I want the guitar to feel like something you've been playing for years, not something that makes you think, 'Well, I'll have to get used to this'. I want it to be something that fits your hand and feels like it's worn in, it's broken in already."

PICKUP THE PIECES

By way of gaining further control over the recipe, Grosh Guitars started winding its own pickups in the late 2000s following its move from California to Colorado in 2005, and the results have been an absolute revelation.

As Don tells us, there's a big difference between trying to translate the sound in your head into a description in a pickup-winder's catalogue and translating that sonic vision directly through your own hands into a product that you manufacture yourself.

"It kind of goes along with the way we make our guitars," he says, "being able to have that control and get our designs the way we want to have them for ourselves. It's only when you actually know how to make the pickup and what goes into that process that you make your prototypes and realise that this tension does this to the sound, this scatter pattern does that. Changing aspects of the build and dialling in the sound, you figure out what makes things happen, and you can tweak it from there to get the sound that you want.

"That was big for us, because I was able to fine-tune the sound of the pickups that I thought in my head I wanted to hear, and we were able to dial that in across the board with all of our pickups. There's also the fact that we can control the supply of the pickups, rather than having issues with getting pickups when we needed them."

Much like the process with the company's original guitar models, the get-it-right-the-first-time theory helped Grosh perfect the sounds of his pickups before the company even started pushing them out to the public. No revision has been required since.

"We just haven't changed them," he says. "I'm really happy with them! It took us a long time to dial that in. It wasn't like we just made a few single-coils and started putting them in our guitars. We probably made 25 to 30 neck single-coils only, because I wanted to start with the neck. If I dialled in the neck tone that I wanted, I believed that it would translate to the other positions.

"Once we had the neck tone, we did a middle, which is basically just a reverse-wound version of the neck. Then we did a bridge, which is an overwound version of the neck. We did a few of those to get the output we wanted, and we had our formula. I just thought, 'Wow, that's the formula I've always heard in my head!' Now, for me, that's the pickup I want to use, so there's some mojo there and I don't want to touch that."

OFFSET OFFERING

Through challenging times that have forced other guitar makers to close their doors, being small, working to a steady flow of orders, and keeping the supply chain running has helped Grosh stay in business during the current pandemic. In addition to working to fulfil what tends to be about six months' worth of back-orders, Grosh has also had time to consider what's next on the design table.

One new offering is likely to be a hollowbody version of the ElectraJet, an offset solidbody design that Grosh introduced in the mid-2000s, before the offset-waist craze really took off.

"Doing this as long as we have, we've seen different trends come and go," says Grosh. "Our original Retro Classic modern Strat- and Tele-style body shapes worked well for us back in the 1990s when I started. They were really popular. Then we came out with our ElectraJet, and that was our biggest seller for about four years. About 60 per cent of our builds were ElectraJets. Then a lot of the other companies started doing more offset body shapes and they started becoming more popular too. We were kind of lucky because we were at the beginning of the curve.

"Also, during that timeframe," he adds, "the market shifted back to traditional Strats and Teles, so we came out with our NOS Retro and NOS Vintage.

"I WAS MORE OF A FENDER PLAYER. THAT'S WHAT I WAS INTERESTED IN, SO THAT'S WHY I ALSO GRAVITATED MORE TOWARDS THOSE DESIGNS WHEN IT CAME TO MY OWN BUILDING"

They're more traditional, and they're now our biggest sellers. But it seems like things always come back around. I'm thinking the modern Stratocaster and Telecaster thing might come back in, so we'll probably start doing more Retro Classics again. That's what I'm hoping anyway."

Ultimately, Grosh is content building guitars that he'd like to play himself, and is perfectly happy to limit the options in that regard. You want a Jazzmaster-style vibrato and bridge on your ElectraJet, a hardware set that's all the rage lately? Sorry. It's a cool look, he says, but Grosh doesn't dig those components' lack of stability.

"It's not something I would play myself," he concludes. "And if you're building guitars you'd want to play yourself, I think you're more passionate about them."

Visit groshguitars.com for more information

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EASY PICKUP MODS THAT ANYONE CAN TRY PART 2

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY HUW PRICE

After covering humbucker and P-90 mods in our last tutorial, this time we're taking a look at how you can improve the tone of classic Fender and Gretsch-style pickups with ease

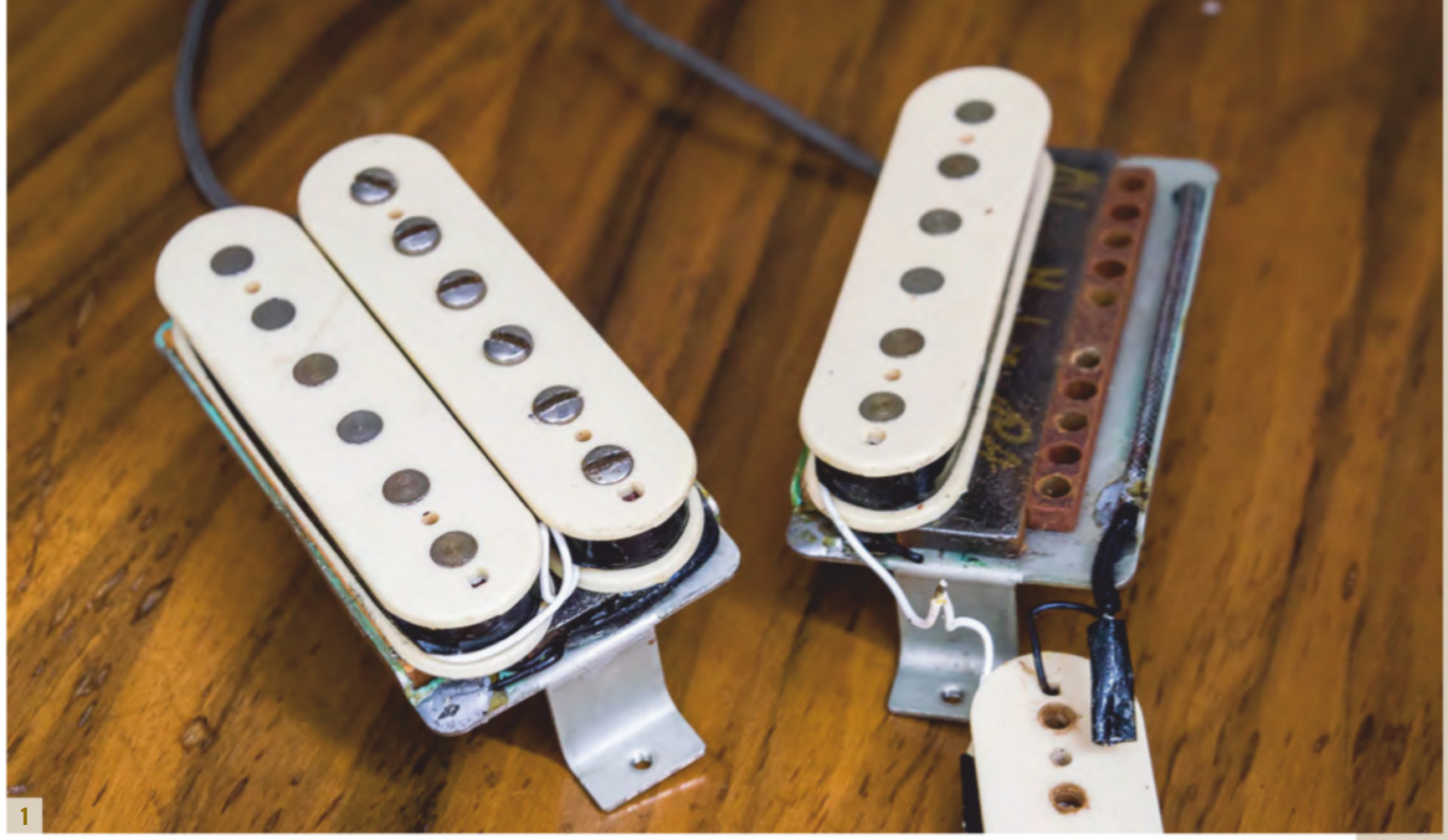
The modular construction of P-90s and PAF-style humbuckers makes it easy to experiment with them. Filter'Trons are much the same, and the magnet and screw swaps I covered previously will work with them too. Just ensure you have the right fillister-head screws and Filter'Tron magnet.

The scope for modifying Fender single-coils and DeArmond Dynasonics is more limited but there are still a few neat tricks that will change their tone and overcome some of the problems players encounter. First though, there's one more humbucker mod that we didn't have room for last time.

REWIRED FOR SOUND

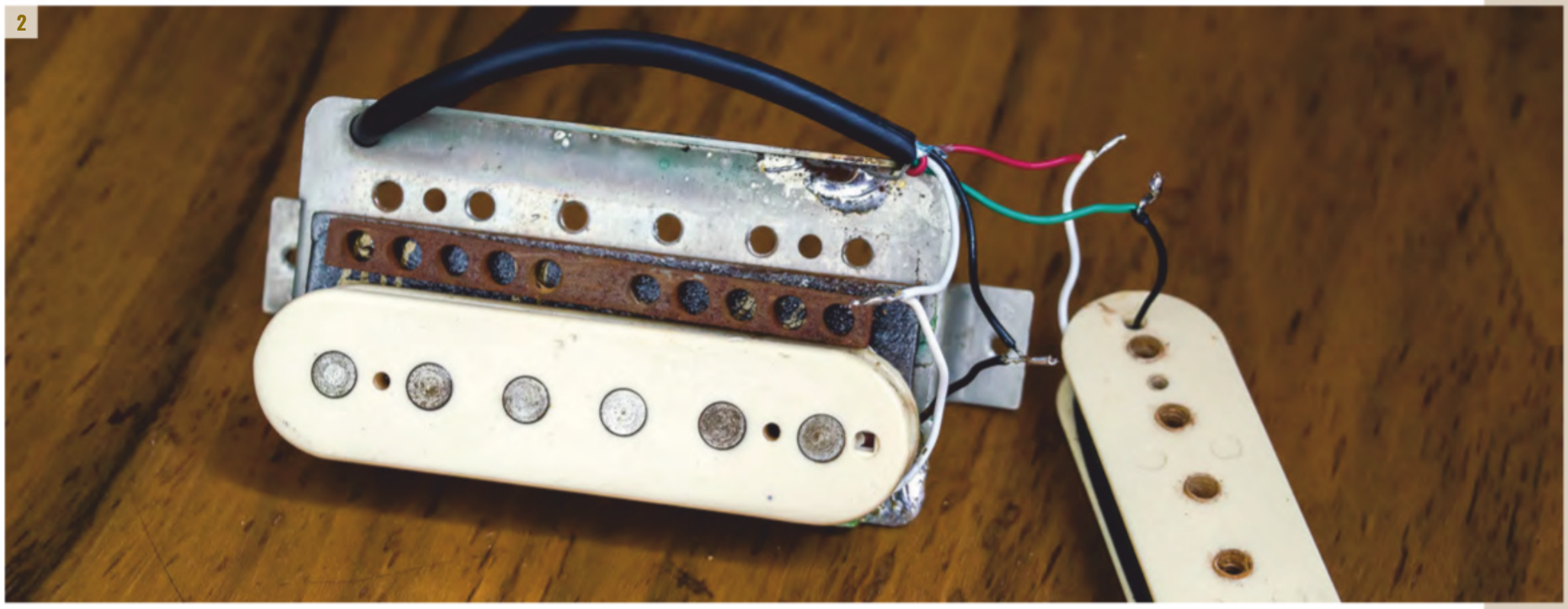
Many humbucker fans enjoy coil splitting, tapping and phase switching but you can't do it with vintage-style humbuckers that have traditional braided wire. Conversely, some players who have humbucker-loaded guitars featuring a bunch of trick wiring options that they neither want nor need may want to swap to vintage-style wiring.

Rewiring humbuckers is a lot cheaper than replacing them. The cover must be removed first, which I described in part one.



1 Humbucker coils are wired in series and here the black start wires provide the ground and output connections, while the white finish wires are soldered together

2 For four-conductor wiring, the start wires are connected to black and green, the finish wires are connected to white and red, and the shield wire is soldered to the baseplate



Let's begin with four-conductor wiring. The wrapping tape has to be removed at one end to expose the coil wires, and you should be able to see two wires for each coil. One wire of the screw coil will be soldered to the centre conductor of the braided wire and one wire of the slug coil will be soldered to ground – probably to the baseplate itself. The other two wires – the coil finish wires – are joined together and should be tucked between the two bobbins.

Unsolder all the wires and remove the screw coil from the assembly by taking out the two bobbin screws and retracting the pole screws if necessary. The braiding will be soldered to the baseplate, so that needs to be unsoldered too. When you strip the insulation and screen from the four-conductor wire, you'll find a twisted bare wire along with the black, white, red and green.

Push the new wire through the hole in the baseplate, then solder the bare wire to the baseplate and re-attach the loose bobbin. Now solder each of the coloured wires to the pickup coil wires.

For this, I suggest you search for a pickup colour-code chart. All the manufacturers do this differently but, since Seymour Duncan provides numerous high-quality wiring diagrams, consider following their colour code. It should steer you right.

With the connections soldered and insulated with plastic tape, tuck the wires under or between the bobbins and wrap some pickup or insulation tape around them to hold everything in place before reattaching the cover. Converting to vintage braided wire follows much the same procedure, only in reverse.

ON A PLATE

Compared to P-90s and humbuckers, the scope for modifying traditional Strat pickups is fairly limited. Even so, there are a couple of external factors that you should be able to consider.

If you find that your pickups are sounding a little dark, have a look under the scratchplate to see if the pickups are mounted with rubber tubing or springs. Some claim that changing to springs gets you a bit more treble and can even introduce a little vintage-style microphony. Too bright with springs? Try rubber tubing for the opposite effect.

Another option is attaching a Tele-type induction plate to the underside of the pickup to beef up the bass and low-mids, and increase overall output. This has become a popular mod for Strat bridge pickups, with some players adding induction plates to all three pickups. The slugs usually need to be taped over before the plate is attached. Melted wax is generally sufficient to hold it in place, and you will need to ground the plate.

WAX OFF

Next is a controversial procedure for reversing the wax-potting process. Wax potting is the practice of dipping wound bobbins into molten wax that impregnates the wire coils and helps prevent squealing microphonic feedback when playing with high gain levels at very high volumes.

3

4

3 A drilled inductor plate has been added to this Strat bridge pickup but you'll need to tape over the slugs if you use an un-drilled plate – and don't forget that ground connection

4 This TV Classic has just come out of the oven and all the wax has melted off the bobbins, baseplate and cover

This is an effective solution. However, a degree of microphony is a key component of vintage pickup tones. The great P-90s, PAFs and Filter'Trons of the 1950s were never wax potted and fans of these usually enjoy high-treble 'air' frequencies and a greater sensitivity both to playing dynamics and the acoustic properties of the guitar itself.

Can wax-potted pickups be unpotted? Some who have tried claim to hear big improvements. I've seen people suggest using hairdryers, placing pickups in hot water and even putting them in an oven to melt the wax so that it flows out of the coils. Clearly there's some degree of risk to the pickup but I decide to take one for the team and place a TV Jones TV Classic pickup in my oven to see what happens.

First, I unsolder and remove the cover, and extract the magnet, as heat can cause demagnetisation. Then I place the bobbins, cover and baseplate in the oven. After baking at 70°C for 20 minutes, the reassembled pickup is five grams lighter and the DC resistance reading is unchanged.

The pickup isn't exactly transformed but the difference is audible. There's a touch more microphony and harmonic bloom, along with reduced shrillness in the upper mids and improved clean-up clarity.

The vast majority of the lost wax most likely came off the covers, the baseplate and outside of the bobbins, rather than the coils themselves. Therefore, the extra microphony could well be coming from the looser assembly now that wax isn't binding everything together. I do prefer the tone after de-waxing but I'm not convinced that the benefits outweigh the obvious risks of baking guitar components in your own kitchen, and advise caution.

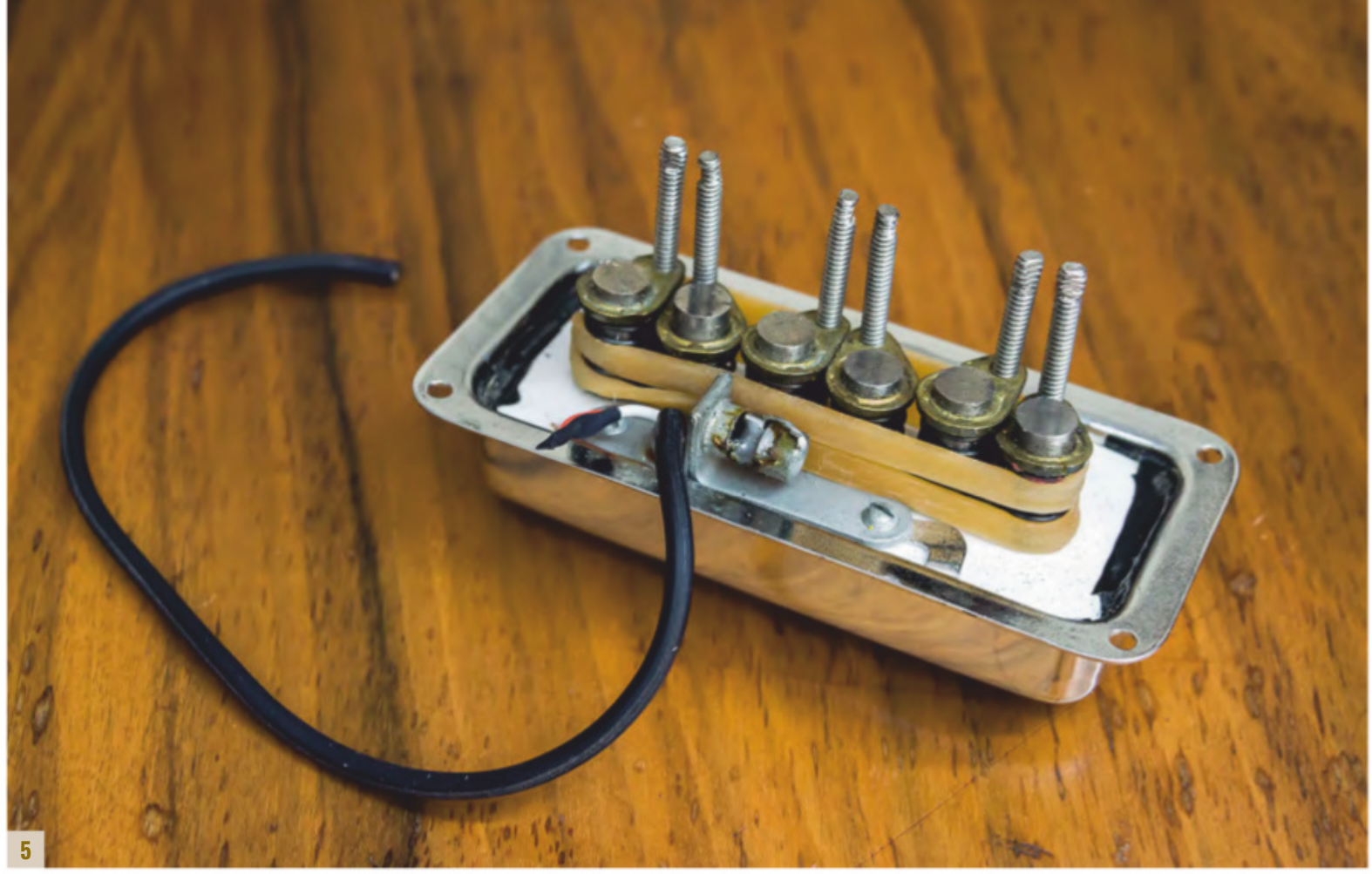
DYNA MIGHT

It's safe to say that when DeArmond came up with their design for the Dynasonic pickup, dealing with high-gain and high-volume guitar amps wasn't a consideration. Dynasonics are bright, clear and almost hi-fi sounding pickups with a unique tone – but they divide opinion.

The most common complaint regarding Dynasonics is that they have a tendency to squeal. The challenge, then, is preventing that. Most experts agree that the excessive microphony is due to all the screws, slugs and hardware dangling below the pickups. The engineering tolerances may reasonably be described as 'loose' and, when those metal parts start vibrating, they start squealing, like a humbucker with a loose cover.

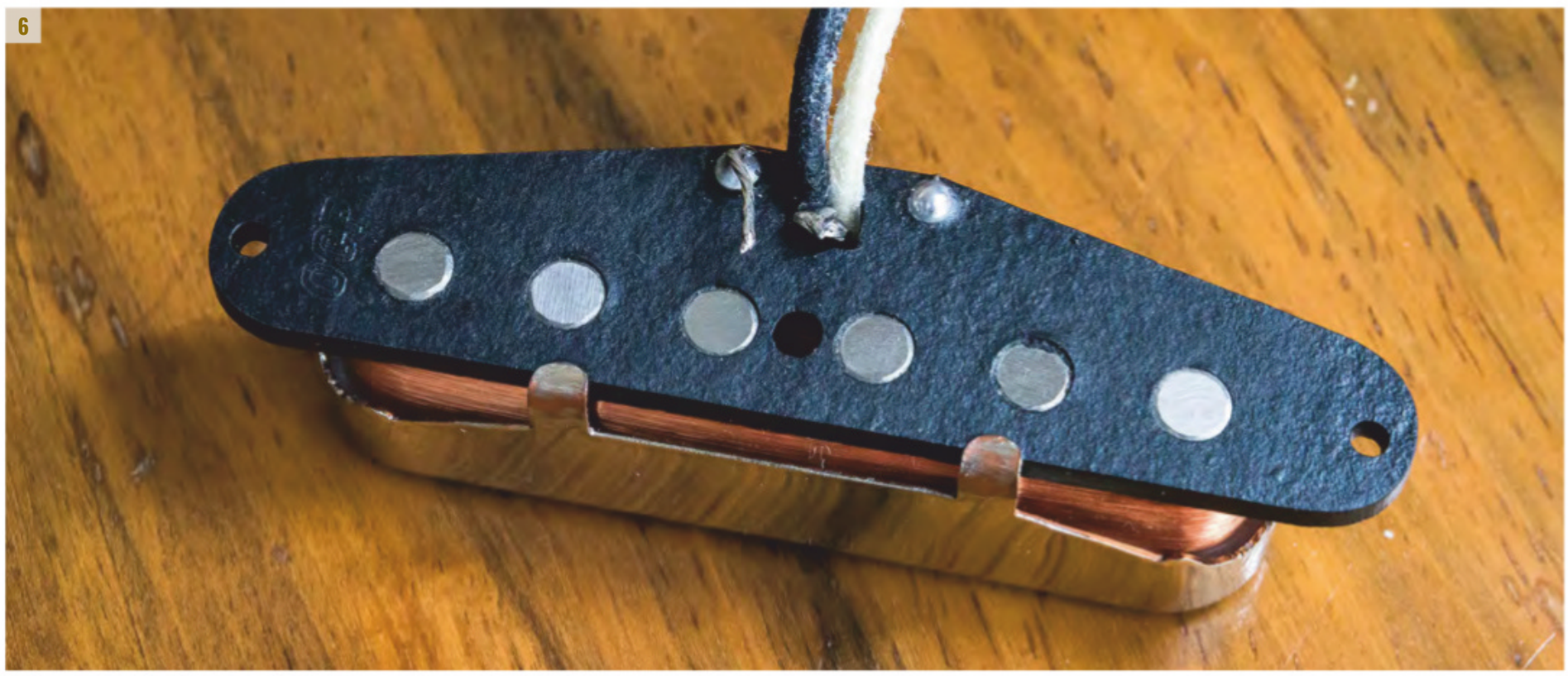
Fortunately, there's an easy fix for stabilising the assembly. All you need to do is wrap the protruding metalwork tightly with rubber bands. Although this may not eliminate squeal completely, it does so pretty effectively.

In theory, you could make things even more stable by using silicon sealant. Doing that, however, would mean you'd have a big problem on your hands if you ever decided to adjust the polepieces. That said, Dynasonics have their limitations and, if they won't play nice with your maxed-out Triple Rectifier, you may need to rethink your choice of pickups or amp.



5 Wrapping rubber bands around the mechanical parts helps to minimise microphonic squeal, while the offset slugs allow you to rotate Dynasonics to balance their tone

6 The cover's ground connection has been unsoldered from the tag next to the two main wires to extend treble response



Another common complaint with Dynasonics is that, for some players, the pickups' lack of balance means that only the middle position is really usable. The magnetic slugs in DeArmond Dynasonics are off centre and Gretsch installed them with the slugs orientated towards the neck and the bridge, just like the screw coils in Gibson humbuckers. As a consequence, the bridge pickup can sound too thin and twangy for some, and the neck pickup can be too boomy for others.

If you're experiencing this, see what happens when you spin the pickups around by 180 degrees. Dynasonics are held down by four screws, so this is simply a case of removing the screws and then replacing them once the pickups have been rotated. You can do this for both pickups or just one and, if you check out vintage Gretsches, you'll see that plenty of Jets and so forth have been modded like this in the past. This is a flexible solution too – if you don't like the results of this quick-fix modification, you can reverse it just as easily.

SOME NECK

The most common complaint with regard to Telecaster neck pickups is that they sound too dark compared to the equivalent Stratocaster units. They certainly sound different, sure, but if you think they're all dull and murky sounding, it may be because you've never heard a good one.

That said, Tele neck pickups can sound somewhat jazzy, and there are a couple of things you can try in order to open up the treble response before you consider swapping pickups entirely. The issue here is often that the capacitance of the metal cover causes treble roll-off, so if yours is steel or brass, try installing a thin nickel cover instead.

If you look on the underside of the pickup, you'll see that the cover has a soldered connection to the negative (usually black) lead-out wire. Try unsoldering this connection and listen to the resulting sound. If you prefer this sound, you can stop there but, be aware, you'll hear a buzzing sound every time you touch the cover.

The next step is to remove the cover altogether and, once you've snipped the cover grounding connection, it's simply a case of bending back the tags and lifting the cover off. But if the pickup is heavily wax-potted, it may need to go in the oven before the cover will come off. Cover removal solves the buzzing problem but leaves the coil vulnerable, especially if the wires are bare in the vintage style.

Get some pickup coil tape and wrap it around the coil to protect it. Not having a cover may also allow you to set the pickup closer to the strings for extra output and brightness. However, the E strings can get lodged under the top of uncovered pickups in the heat of battle, and this can damage the coil.

It's bizarre that plastic covers for Tele neck pickups are seemingly impossible to find. A grounded open-top metal cover is a good alternative but black or white plastic covers would be great for achieving a stealth-Esquire look, as well as clearer tones. Can somebody start making them, please?

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7

7 This Tele neck pickup has had its cover removed, the coils are taped over for added protection and it looks good

8 Changing from springs to rubber tubing can help to reduce microphonic squeal

9 Placing soft foam in the bottom of the pickup cavity can also prevent Tele bridge pickups from squealing

8

ALTERED BRIDGE

Like Dynasonics, Tele bridge pickups have a reputation for squealing. There are a few workarounds though. It's generally accepted that the cause of the problem is the metal inductance plate and the way the pickup is attached to the bridge.

I mentioned earlier that you may be able to enhance the treble response and microphony of Strat pickups by using height-adjustment springs. Here, the idea is to do the opposite, because microphony needs to be reduced. If you find springs under the bridge, try replacing them with 50s-spec rubber tubing.

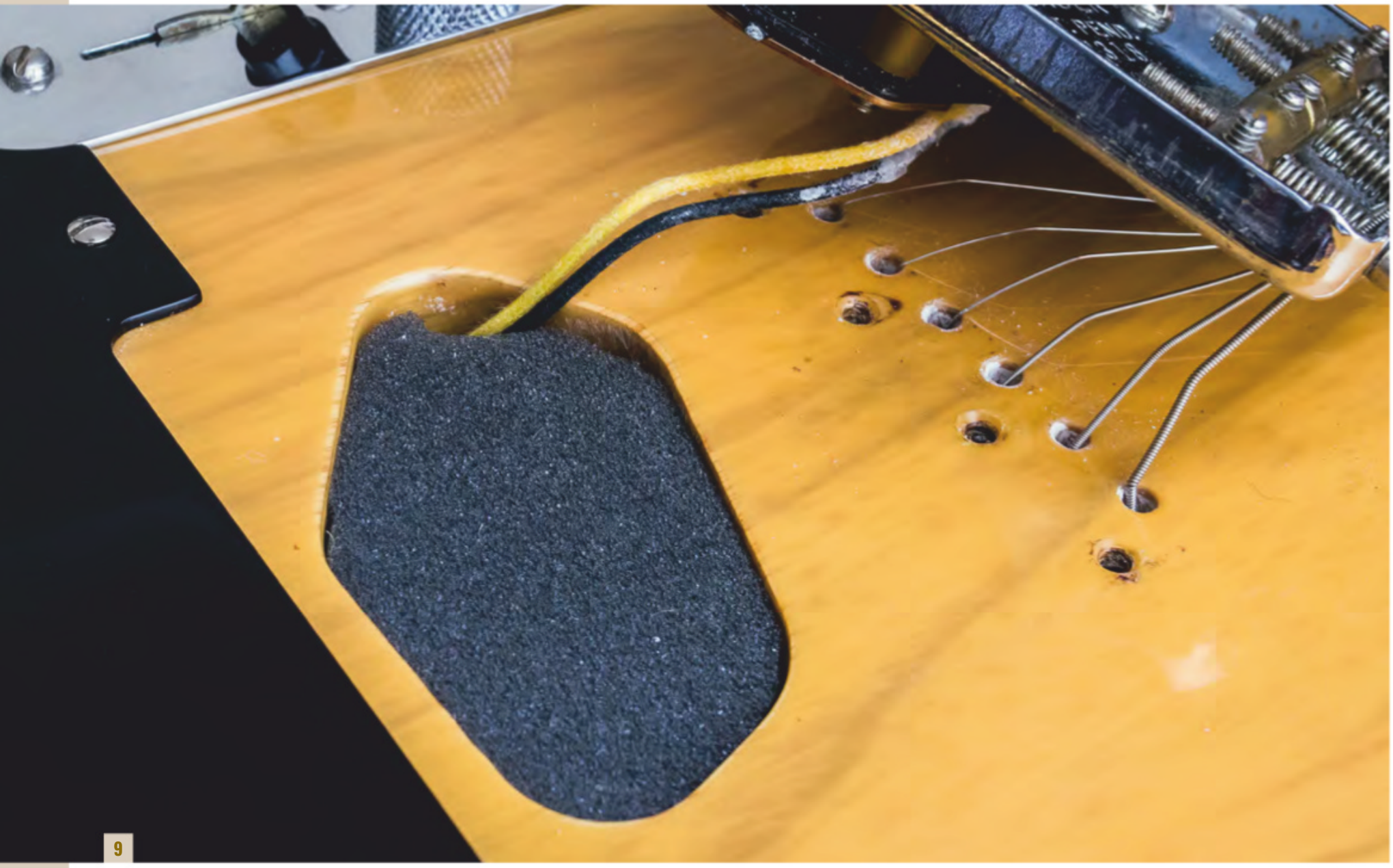
You can get pre-cut pieces of tubing for ludicrous prices from guitar-parts suppliers or, alternatively, you can simply search for 'latex rubber tube' on a well-known auction site and buy the stuff by the metre for far less. Make sure the inside diameter of the tube is wide enough for the screws.

The next thing is to prevent the metal base plate from vibrating. Assuming the plate is firmly attached to the pickup, place some foam inside the pickup cavity to dampen the vibration. The thickness and sponginess are important because, if the foam is too thin, it won't press tightly enough against the pickup and, if it's too thick and insufficiently spongy, the foam will press too hard on the pickup and make height adjustment impossible.

Consider mounting the pickup directly onto the body too. This is the favoured option of various builders, including G&L. GE Smith specified exactly that for his Fender signature model too. The tone is a little warmer and the Tele bite is slightly softened but you might find it fiddly without converting to a chopped Tele bridge at the same time.

With care, it's possible to align the pickup with the cut-out in the stock bridge but, to adjust pickup height, you may need to widen the three screw holes in the bridge to get a screwdriver inside.

The pickup itself could be mounted on screws or a foam block, and you'll need to run a separate ground wire for the bridge plate. The length of the screws also needs to be considered because, if they're too long, you may end up screwing your Tele to your workbench.



The metal baseplate can also be swapped to tweak the tone – or added if your pickup doesn't have one. Vintage examples were made from steel plated in zinc or copper but brass and stainless steel offer different effects. Pickup guru Bill Lawrence identified three areas of influence: ferromagnetic functions, electrodynamic functions and shielding. Only the first two affect tone.

Ferromagnetic functions stabilise and boost the magnetic field, and increase inductance – but only steel plates do this. Steel, copper and brass baseplates all cause eddy current interference, which alters the frequency response of a pickup. The bass and low midrange is beefed up to balance out the trebles. So copper or brass plates can be used to warm up a Tele bridge pickup without increasing output. If you use steel, you'll a get fatter tone and increased output.

Believe it or not, modifying pickups can be just as much fun as changing them – and it's a lot cheaper too. You need to be careful though, because pickups can be delicate. We think the rewards outweigh the risks – apart from, perhaps, with that oven technique. G

AMPLIFIER FAQ

A working class hero is something to be but a working knowledge of amplifier classes is not be sniffed at either. Rift head honcho Chris Fantana gets technical

Have a burning question about your amp or, worse still, a burning amp? Email us at editors@guitar.com

Hi, Chris. I'm looking at buying a new amplifier and the sales spiel says it's Class A. What does this mean?
SCOTT, BARNSLEY

Hi, Scott. Great question. There's definitely a lot of confusion around amplifier classes and what they mean to the end user. The output stage of an amplifier can operate in many ways, using various methods. We use the class system to give a broad indication of an amplifier's characteristics and performance. These classes, of which there are nine in total, are related to the amount of time that the amplifier is passing current. This is expressed as a fraction of the signal waveform applied to the input. Some of the classes contain sub-classes, usually indicated by a suffix.

There are nine main classes: A, AB, B, C, D, E, F, G, and H. We valve-amp-loving guitar players only really need to concern ourselves with A, AB, and B.

CLASS A

The output valves in this class are conducting 100 per cent of the time. As a sine wave can be thought of as a side-on view of a coiled spring – look at a vibrating guitar string to see what I mean – we say that the conduction angle is 360 degrees.

Because these valves are working 100 per cent of the time, they don't get a rest, so they're actually quite inefficient. They have a maximum theoretical efficiency of just 25 per cent, which is why Class A amplifiers don't produce much power. The upside to this design is that circuits can be relatively simple to build and maintain, while producing better mid-to-high-frequency performance.

If we use two EL34s, for example, in Class A you'll be able to produce about 20-watts of RMS power.

CLASS B

You probably won't come across a Class B guitar amplifier but it's important to understand them anyway. In this class, each output valve only conducts exactly one half of the input signal, so the conduction angle is 180 degrees. One valve will conduct the positive half, and the other the negative.

As we now have a 180-degree rest period for each valve between conduction events, we can use that to cool the valve down and therefore push it harder when it is conducting. Class B amps can be more efficient than Class A designs, with a maximum efficiency of more than 75 per cent. You can get a lot of power from operating a Class B but, like every other class, it has drawbacks.

Photos © Eleanor Jane

For guitar use, a Class B amplifier won't sound very musical with an odd balance of both even and odd-order harmonics when overdriven.

In Class B, our pair of EL34s will be able to produce about 80-watts with relative ease.

CLASS AB

So what is Class AB? As the name suggests, it's a mix of both. In Class AB, the conduction angle is greater than 180 degress but less than 360 degrees. It's up to the circuit designer to choose where on that line it sits. Usually, in a guitar amplifier, the signal will stay in the Class A region, where it's amplified with good fidelity, and move closer to Class AB when pushed harder. A classic example of this is the Vox AC30, which is Class A when clean but quickly moves into AB when pushed even slightly.

Nearly every guitar amplifier with multiple output valves will operate in Class AB. Class AB is more efficient that Class A but less so than Class B. Our EL34s have a slightly easier time in Class AB than B, with typical outputs ranging from 35 to 50 watts.

So, does an amplifier's class affect its tone? That's all we really want to know, right? Well, the answer is complicated: yes and no.

While there are tonal differences between the classes, they are easiest to spot in a hi-fi application, whereas in our low-fidelity guitar amplifiers, these are less clear. You see, even the cleanest guitar signal is far more distorted than that you'd find in a typical hi-fi. For reference, hi-fis are considered to be 'clean' up to about 0.5 per cent distortion, although modern units will never stray above 0.1 per cent. Our guitar amps, on the other hand, rarely drop below one per cent, and some manufacturers consider 10 per cent as clean operation. If you want to know what your clean guitar signal really sounds like, plug into a modern bass amp – you'll notice the missing harmonics and overtones generated by your guitar amp.

There are other features in guitar amps that affect tone far more than its class ever could, such as the tonestack or method of biasing the output valves, so as far as the player is concerned, it may well be insignificant. From a designer's point of view, it's the foundation on which your entire circuit is built.

Using the class system to market and sell your amplifiers? Well, it's just that – marketing. G

Visit riftamps.com for more on Rift's range of British-built boutique amplifiers

ABOVE Brian May is one of the most prominent users of the Vox AC30. Often referred to as a Class A circuit, the AC30 runs in Class A when clean but quickly moves into AB when pushed even slightly

FACING PAGE Here's one of Brian's many AC30s being given an overhaul by his amp tech, the late Mike Hill

TRINI
LOPEZ
MODEL

1

2

3

4

1 The Trini on the bench for inspection. Doesn't that headstock look sad with only five strings?

2 I traced the issue to the holes in the Kluson-style tuners. These sharp edges were present on all six shafts

3 A closer look at the rough-hewn problem

4 When it comes to detuning the strings, be careful with string winders on this type of headstock, which is so wide that the wood extends almost to the tuner buttons

TECH TALK

HOW TO ELIMINATE ROUGH OR SHARP EDGES ON TUNER SHAFTS

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY MICHAEL JAMES ADAMS

Strings breaking at the tuner end? Here's how to fix it

During the course of a guitar repair, I believe that the instrument can tell us what it requires in order to be its best self. A dry fretboard crying out for a drop of linseed oil, a vibrato that won't return to pitch for lack of lubrication or a buzz that appears only when a specific chord is played (which often points to strings rattling behind your fretted notes due to a lack of relief), every symptom has a cause and every cause a treatment.

This idea seems to manifest most frequently with regard to the unfortunately very common issue of string breakage. When a string breaks, it's good practice to pay attention not only to *how* it breaks – ie what the player was doing in the moment – but also *where* it breaks.

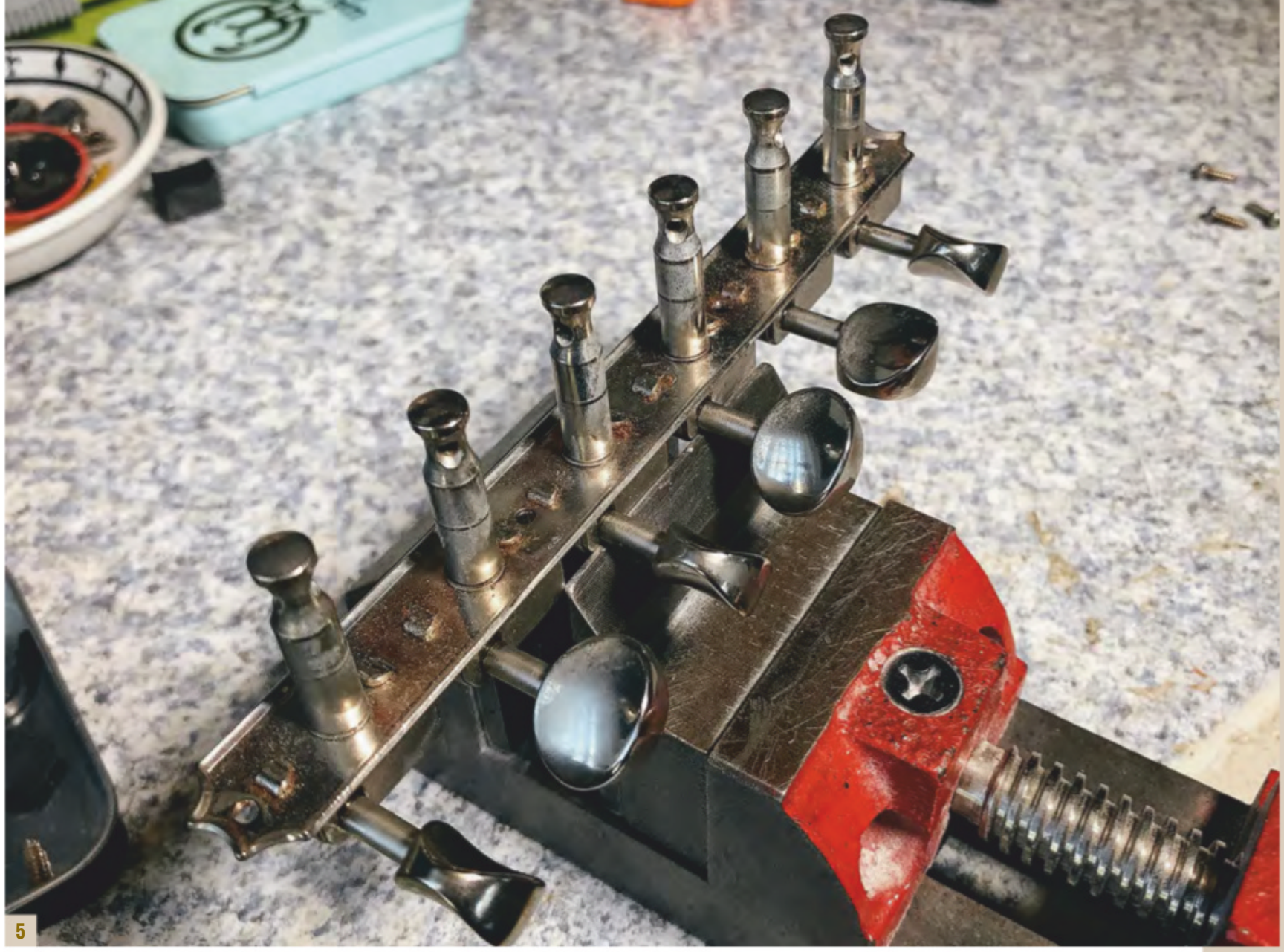
If the string breaks at the saddle, it stands to reason that the saddle has a burr or sharp edge that will need to be smoothed down with a file. If the string breaks behind the saddle, then surely there's a hidden cause of the problem, as was the case with the Telecaster Deluxe and its hardtail bridge in the first instalment of this column.

In the case of my new Gibson Trini Lopez reissue, which you're no doubt familiar with at this stage, a string that broke at the headstock revealed an underlying issue that I had yet to notice.

I was in the middle of tracking here at home when it all went south. I've been fortunate through this strange period of history to have plenty of things to do remotely to keep money rolling in, while also feeling creatively fulfilled. This means I've taken on more guitar repair jobs than I'd normally expect, and have also had some music to work on with friends such as engineer/producer extraordinaire Brian Frederick, one half of electronic pop outfit Subtle Smiles.

Brian's been good enough to throw projects my way over the past few months and, while I normally have the time to fire back rather quickly, the weeks leading up to this article have been incredibly busy, so I was running a bit behind.

I'd been at my desk for about an hour. Having just nailed down some good tones with the Line 6 Helix, I got about halfway through a solo when my high E snapped.



5 The Trini's strip tuners are secured in my tiny nut-making vice

6 Threading the abrasive cord through the tuner shaft

7 Smoothing out those rough spots by moving back and forth

8 Checking my work by touch

This threw the trapeze-equipped Trini out of tune and, of course, stopped my session dead in its tracks. I could have swapped for another guitar but, with nothing else in the quiver that matched its semi-hollow charm, I texted Brian an apology: "Uhhhh, it's going to be a few more days. I had an accident."

As is standard procedure for a broken string, I replayed the snap in my mind, cataloguing the details as if I were Vincent D'Onofrio in *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*.

THE FACTS

- I was in the middle of a solo
- I was bending the string up a whole step
- I was definitely digging in with the pick
- There was no indication of needing to retune prior to the break
- The string broke at the tuner

That's it! Once that final bit of information bubbled up to the surface, I knew to inspect the guitar past the nut for any irregularities.

Sure enough, when I reached the tuner, the culprit revealed itself. There was the bit of remaining string coiled around the post and, when I pulled it taut with my fingers, it stopped at the pass-through hole. Squinting, I could see sharp edges around the entire perimeter of the hole. This was the true reason for my wiry woes.

To fix this, I detuned and clipped the strings, then removed the tuners from the headstock to minimise any risk of messing up the finish while I worked. Trini Lopez models use strip tuners, which are the same Kluson-style parts you'll find on Fenders, only set on a metal strip that mounts with four screws instead of seven. This alleviates concerns about tuner alignment and makes the job easier, the drawback being ease of replacement if one tuner goes bad.

9

10

9 Admiring the shiny, thoroughly-buffed edges of my tuners

10 Here's an even closer look

11 I've reinstalled the tuners and secured them with the four mounting screws

12 All strung up and ready to get back to work

11

12

After freeing the tuners from the headstock, I set the guitar aside and mounted them in my small StewMac vice for inspection. Once I got up close, I could see that all six tuner shafts were exhibiting the same rough-hewn appearance. For the sake of peace of mind if nothing else, I'd have to work on all six.

With the tuners held firmly in place, I reached for my trusty roll of Mitchell's abrasive cord. As I've mentioned in a previous instalment of this column, abrasive cord is essentially sandpaper on rope, ideal for use in hard-to-reach places and for smoothing out rough edges on guitar hardware. In the case of these tuners, the #52 size is suitable for passing through the tuner shafts and buffing out those sharp edges.

This process really is just as simple as threading the tuners and holding a length of the abrasive cord with both hands, and then moving your hands in a smooth back-and-forth motion until you've rounded off those harsh corners. Rinse and repeat for the other five tuners, inspect your work closely to make sure you've done the job well, then reinstall the tuners and string your guitar as you ordinarily would.

This is the kind of job that you can really only be sure you've done correctly after some time has passed, the main benefit being increased string longevity. Once again, the guitar will let me know if it needs further attention. Until then, I'll just have to get back to recording and see if I can make it through that solo. G

For more where this came from, follow Mike on Instagram @puisheen

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ESSENTIAL BLUES LESSONS

PLAY BLUES LIKE **PETER GREEN**

WORDS LEIGH FUGE

He may be gone but Peter Green's peerless playing will inspire us for generations to come. Learn how to play the Supernatural way.

Peter Green's genius was a gift to guitarists of all backgrounds. Whether it's the unique tone of his famous 1959 Les Paul, his wonderfully fluid and expressive playing style or a combination of the two, the chances are that, even if you haven't been directly inspired by him, someone you've been inspired by has.

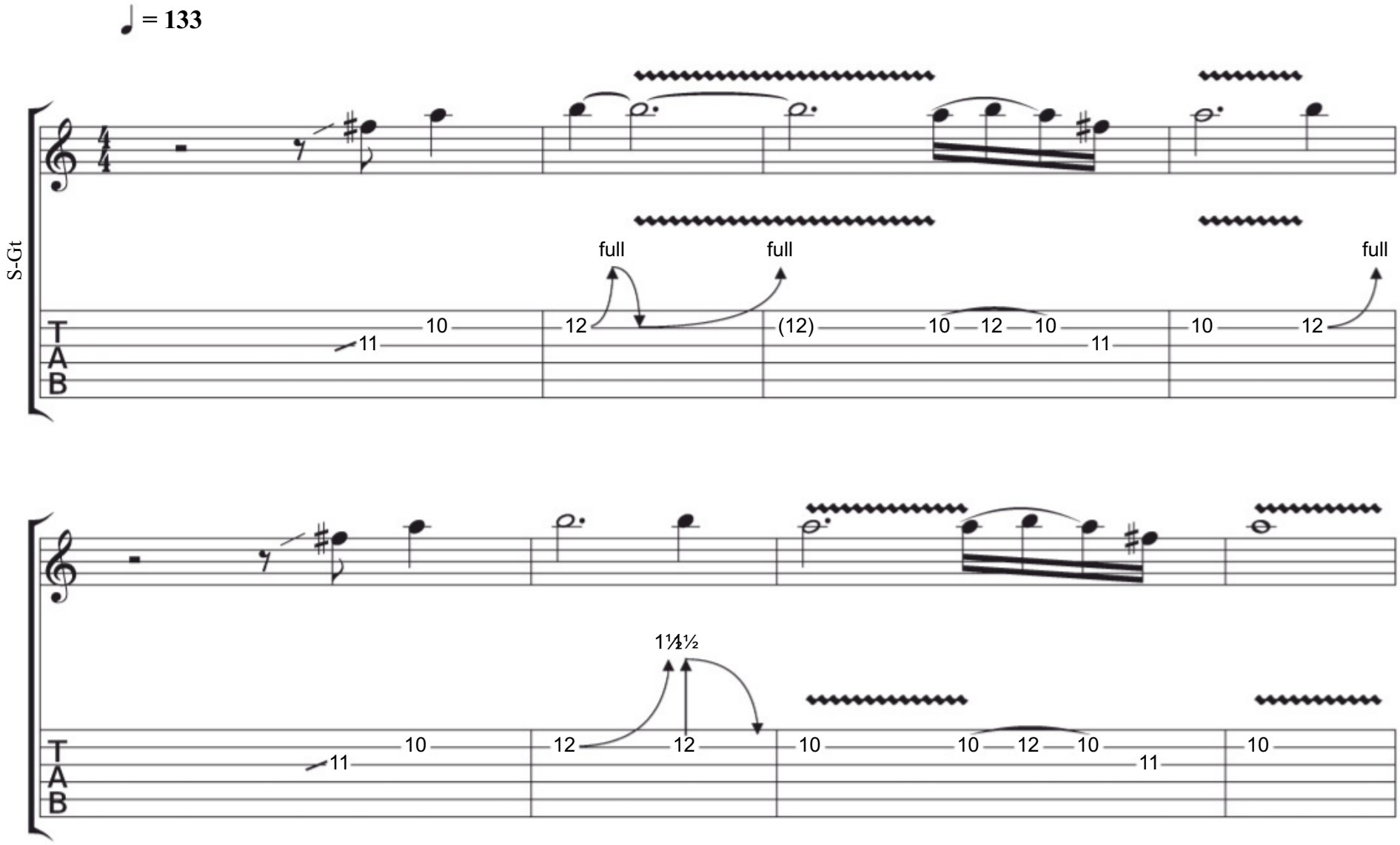
As we continue to reflect on Green's legacy and impact on the music world in the wake of his passing, what better way to appreciate that legacy than by examining his guitar style in detail, and finding out what made his playing so influential and iconic.

Leigh Fuge is a guitar teacher and professional musician from Swansea in the UK. He has taught hundreds of students face to face and via the MGR Music platform. He has more than 10 years of experience working in the industry as a touring musician, session guitarist and teacher.

LICK 1

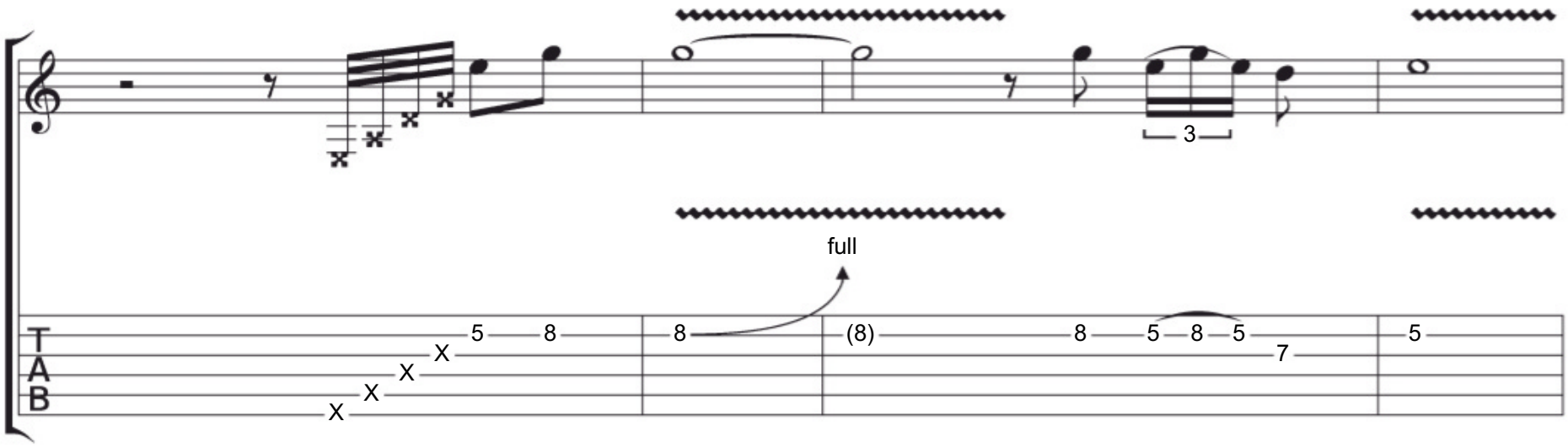
Peter Green was a huge BB King fan and this melodic lick shows off his love of King's phrasing. It starts ahead of beat 1, on the '&' of the third beat from the count-in. This is all based around an area of the fretboard which became known as the BB box, which is the third shape of the A minor pentatonic with the third shape of the A major pentatonic overlaid on top.

There's a double bend in the first repeat, for which you bend up, release and bend back up again without re-picking. On the second repeat, this is replaced with a tone and a half bend, followed by a pre-bend into a release.



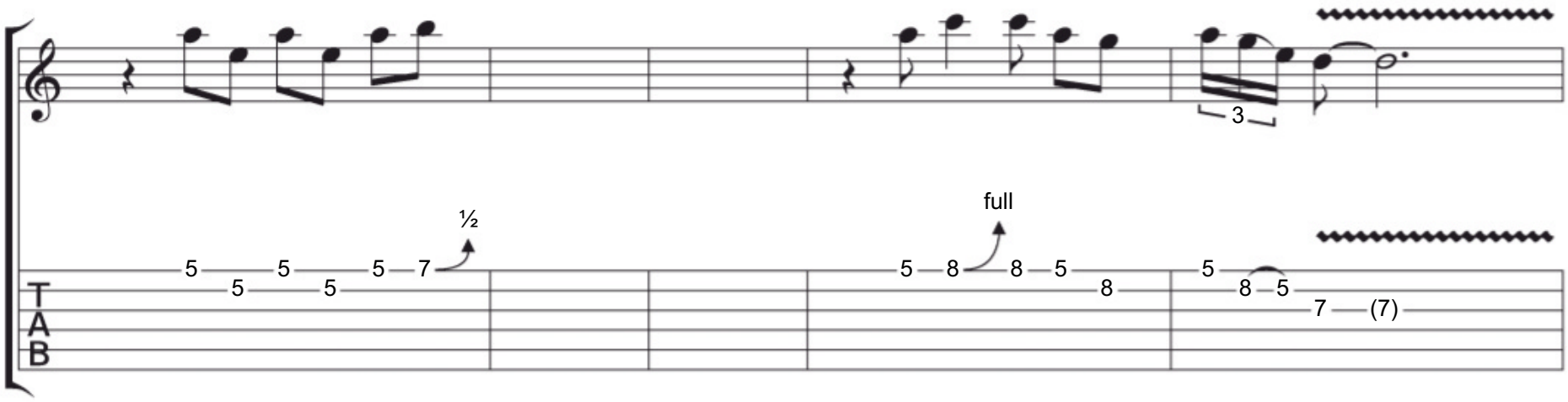
LICK 2

Here, we start on beat 4 of the count-in but, right before that, you should rake into the first note. Green played with a very vocal style and would often sustain bends for extended durations. This bend is sustained for more than a bar and a half. The ending of this lick is a pentatonic flurry that involves a quick hammer-on and pull-off triplet on the B string.



LICK 3

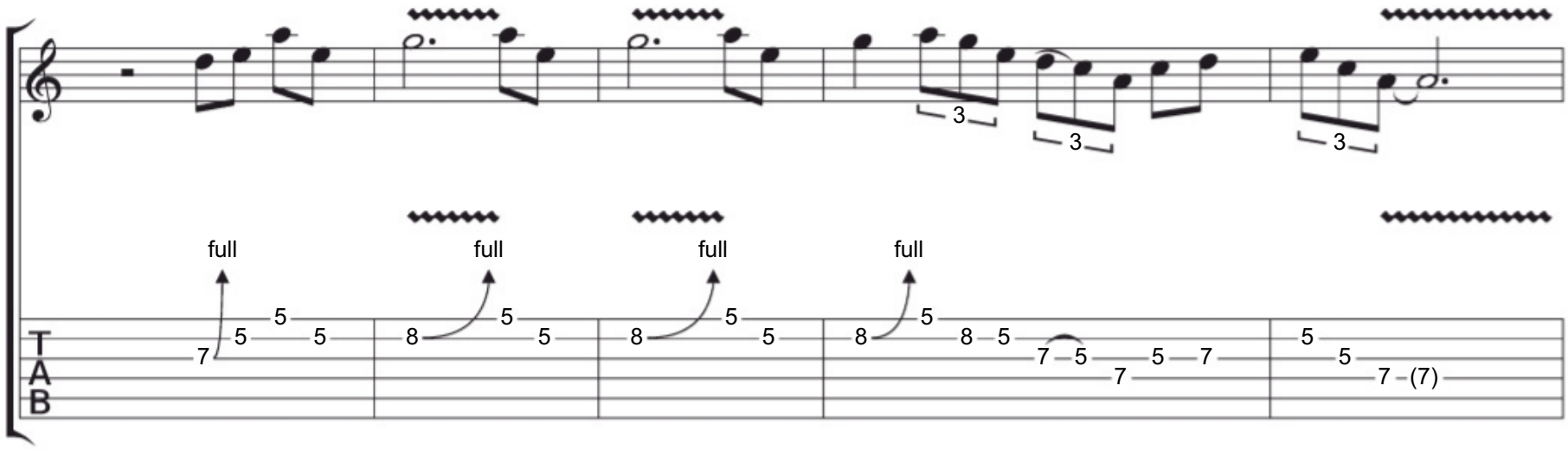
Space is an important facet of any guitarist's style but, to emulate Green, it's especially important to be conscious of this. This example has a full two-bar rest between the first and second section but it's important to count this properly and to allow that space to become part of the phrase. The final bar is a very quick descending flurry. Don't worry if you can't play this very accurately at first, it's more about the feel it creates.



LICK 4

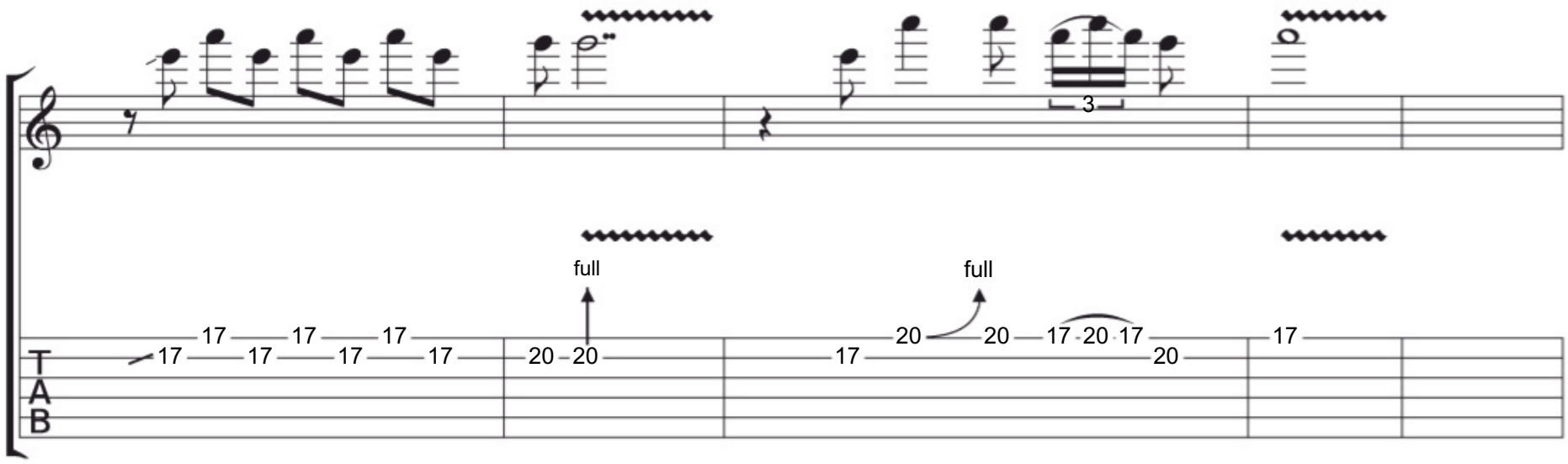
Green was never known as a particularly fast player but he occasionally leaned into some bursts of speed in his solos. This longer lick is a fine example of a multi-bar phrase in that style. The opening bending phrase begins on beat 3 of the count-in before launching into a short repeating lick.

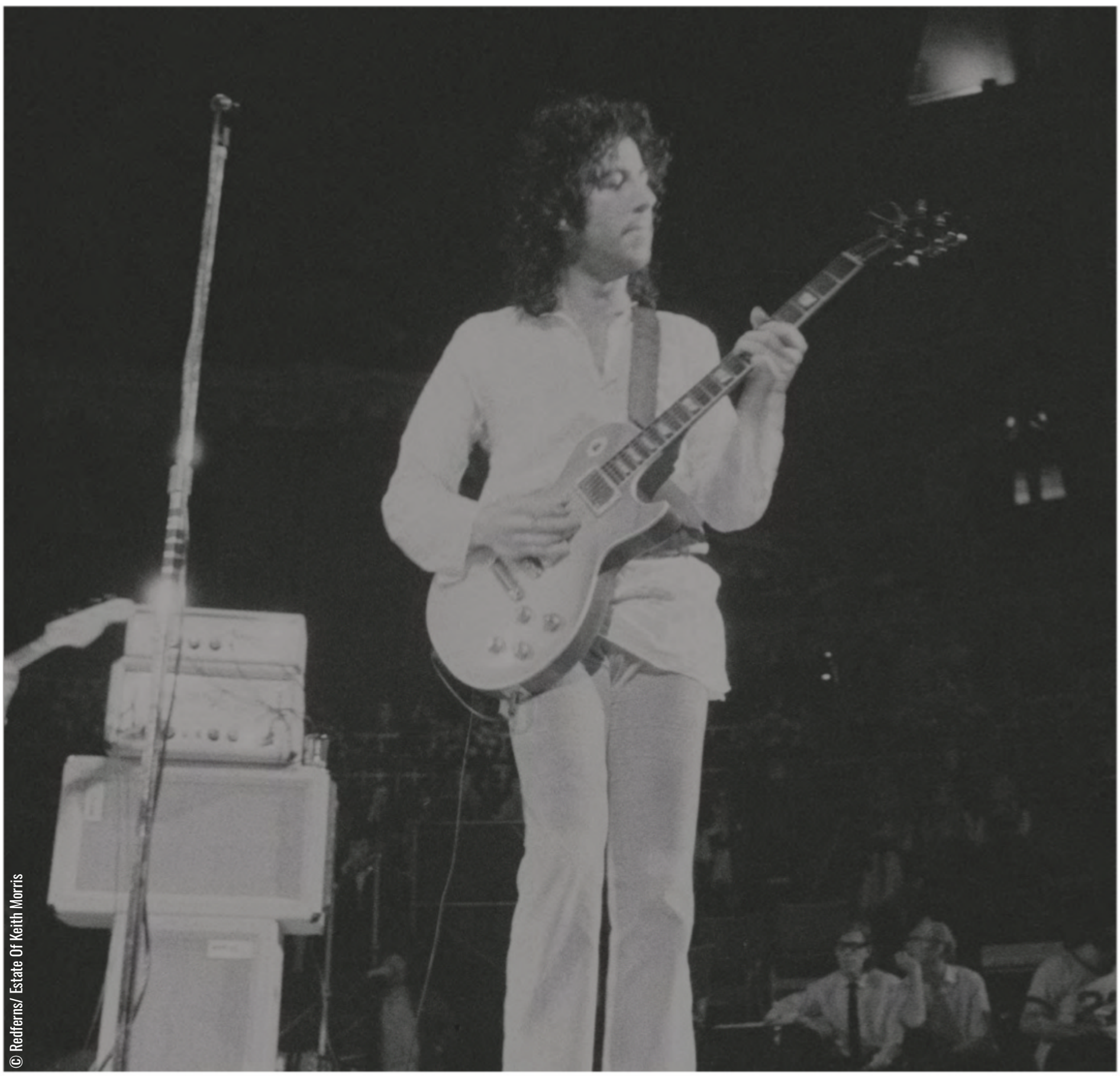
Once you hit the bar 4, the note density increases and there's a descending triplet line that runs through the A minor pentatonic. The final bar is a descending A minor triad chord. Incorporating partial chord shapes such as this is a great way to add melodic twists to standard guitar parts.



LICK 5

We finish off up the top end of the fretboard, with a slide-guitar-style phrase before one of Green's trademark pre-bends. Pre-bend at the 20th fret on the B string before you pick it, and don't forget to apply lots of vibrato to make it sing. The final speedy phrase should be approached with attitude over accuracy. The short burst of intensity is there to create a mood within the solo. This technique was also used a lot by Eric Clapton during the same period.





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Simon & Garfunkel performing on *Ready Steady Go!* in 1966

© Chris Walter / WireImage / Getty Images

CHORD CLINIC

HOW TO PLAY CHORDS LIKE PAUL SIMON

WORDS ROD FOGG

With a long career involving unpredictable twists, turns and collaborations, Paul Simon is one of the most successful songwriters of the past 60 years. We take a look at the chord shapes and sequences that define his sound

After the acoustic version of *The Sound Of Silence* failed to kickstart his career in the US, Paul Simon moved to London in 1965 to find the folk boom in full swing. The fleshed-out electric version led to his breakthrough in the States, a 14-year collaboration with friend Art Garfunkel, and his subsequent solo career. But he soon left folk behind to develop into a leading pop/rock songwriter. With intelligent lyrics, strong melodies and rich vocal harmonies, Simon is both highly inventive in his use of chord sequences and an underrated guitarist.

Here, we've taken our inspiration from the chord sequences he put together for his first few folk-orientated albums. Simon made frequent use of suspended chords, slash chords and minor sevenths in this period, and often as part of original sequences.

Next time, we'll take a look at the longer and more complex chord sequences found in Simon's solo albums, together with some from the period when he was influenced by music from Africa and the Caribbean.

Rod Fogg is a London-based guitarist, teacher and writer. He is the author of *The Ultimate Guitar Course* (Race Point 2014), *The Electric Guitar Handbook* (Backbeat, 2009) and contributed to bestseller *The Totally Interactive Guitar Bible* (Jawbone Publishing, 2006). Find out more at rodfogg.com

FIGURE 1

This is essentially a chord of A followed by D, and the fingers that make the D can be hammered on and possibly pulled off. Try picking the open A in the bass first – it will sound a little sweeter with a capo at the second fret. The pinky can also be hammered on to move between the E and E sus4 chords. Strum this one with your pick.

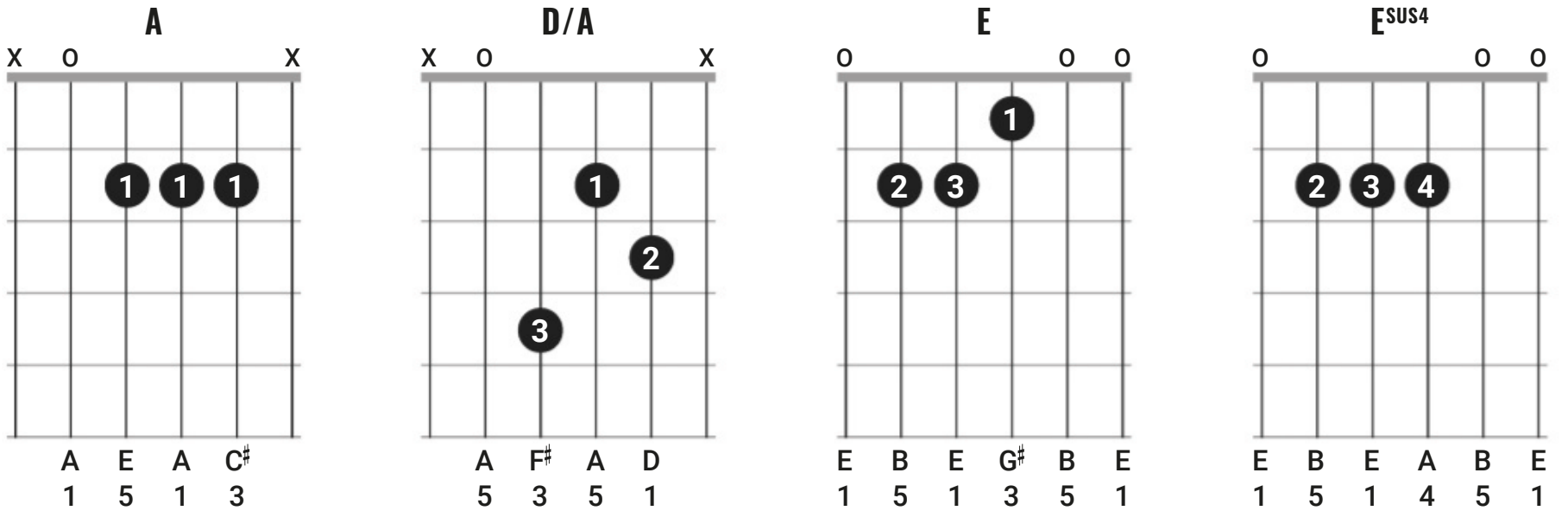


FIGURE 2

Even early in his career, Simon often created chord sequences that went beyond the usual I, IV and V favoured by folk musicians at the time. This example, using chords II, V, III and VI in A could work either as a four-bar sequence playing each chord in turn or by alternating between the B minor seventh and E chords before moving onto C# minor seventh and F#. Try adding D and A major chords at the end to bring the sequence to a satisfying conclusion.

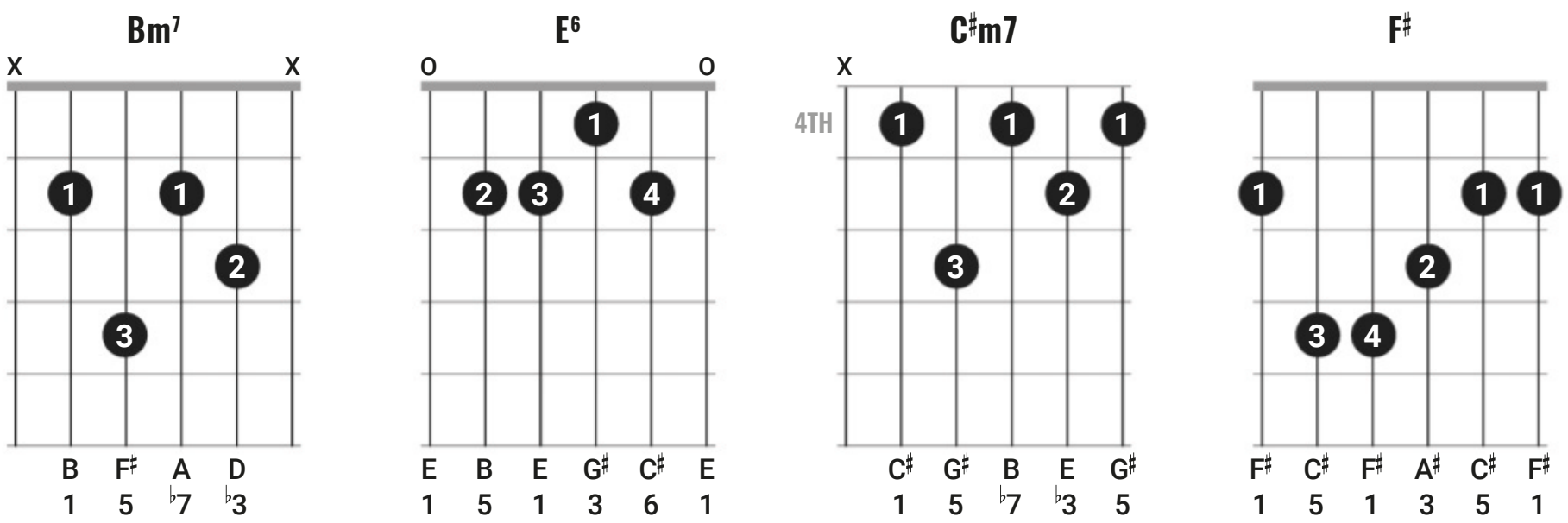


FIGURE 3

Simon might fingerpick an example such as this, playing the two D chords by alternating between the D and G strings with his thumb, while fitting in the top two notes with the index and middle fingers. For the A chords, the thumb would alternate between the A and G strings. Try the A chord from figure 1 mixed in with these suspended chords.

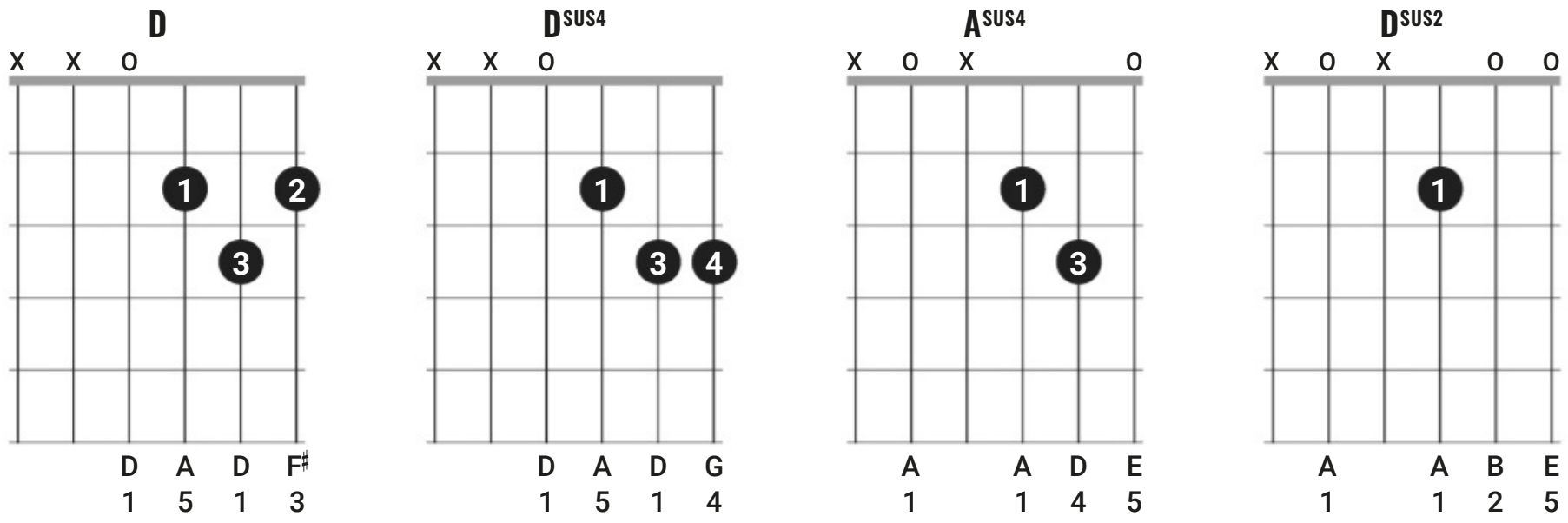


FIGURE 4

Simon doesn't always use the dependable folk guitarist's alternating thumb from figure 3. In an example such as this, the low C# can be sounded repeatedly with the thumb on the beat, in the style of a constant-bass blues. Meanwhile, the upper notes are played as an arpeggio. The same idea continues after dropping down to the low F# and B/F# chords.

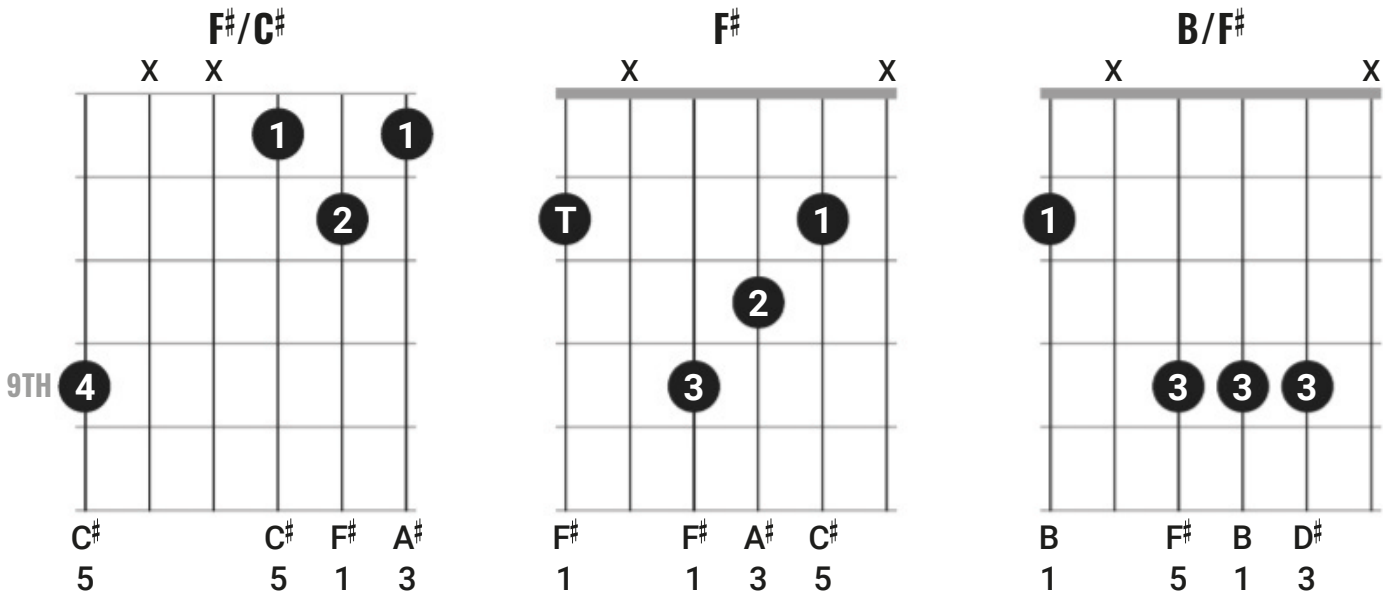
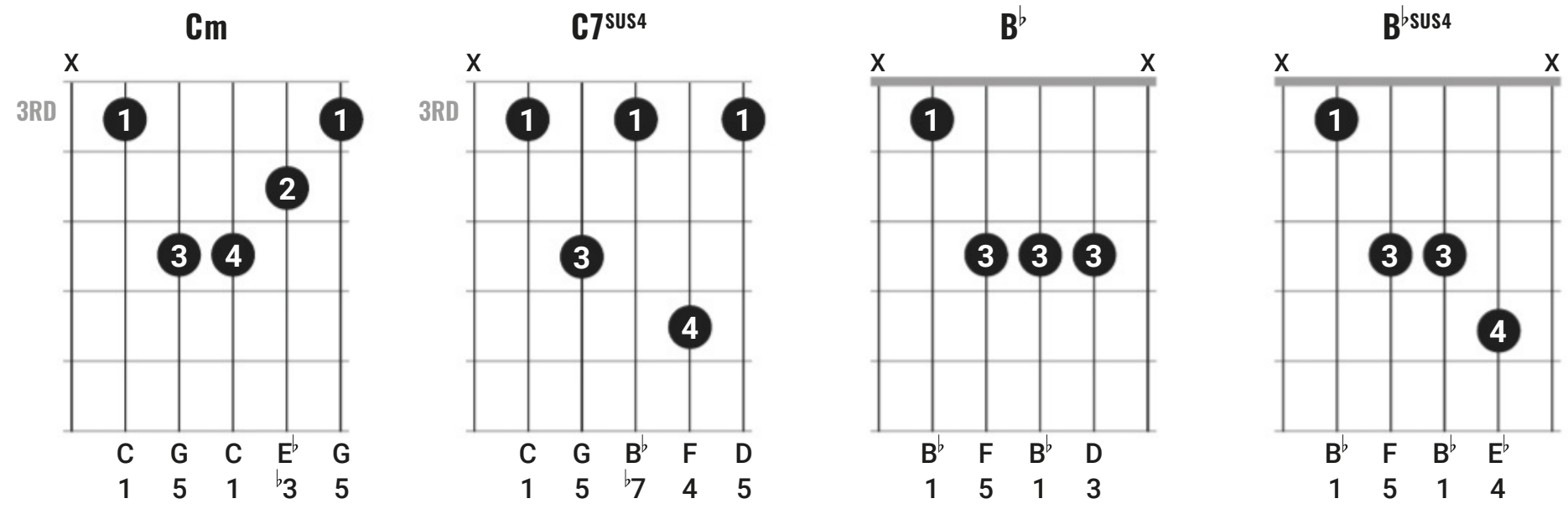


FIGURE 5

Barre chords have a richer sonority than open-string chords and Simon makes frequent use of them. In this example, strum with your pick and leave your second finger in place on the Cm7sus4 chord so that you can use your pinky for hammer-on/pull-offs. Do the same for the B flat and B flat sus4.



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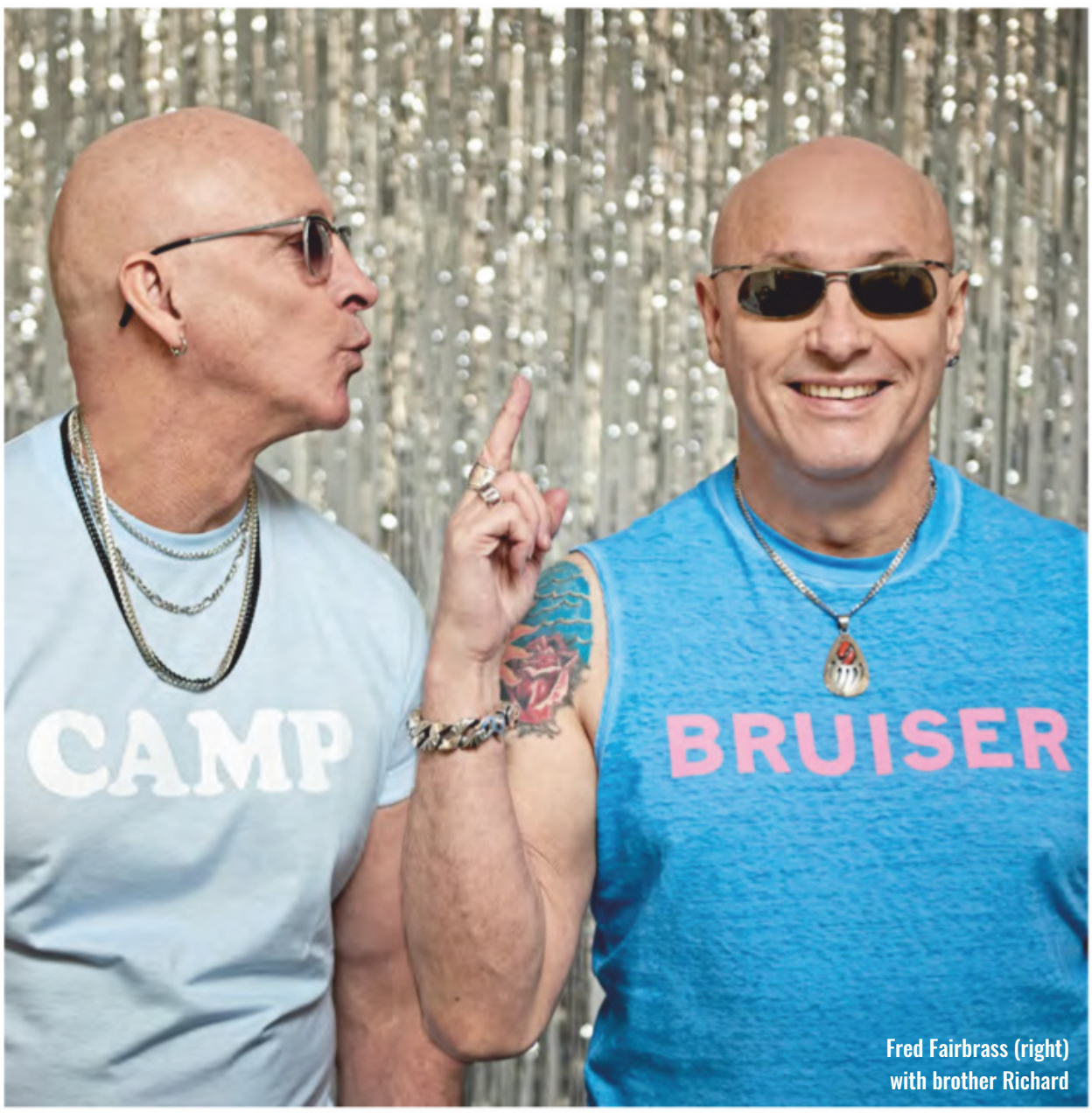

Fred Fairbrass (right) with brother Richard

TALKBOX

FRED FAIRBRASS

INTERVIEW SAM ROBERTS

In addition to being partly responsible for 90s global mega-hit *I'm Too Sexy*, Right Said Fred guitarist Fred Fairbrass is also a guitar aficionado with a penchant for FujiGen Strats

The moment it all started...

"Probably when I saw a local band play at my school during the lunch break. I think they were called The Game. I was about 11 years old, maybe 12. I knew then that I wanted to learn to play. I pleaded with my dad to buy me a guitar. He eventually bought me a classical guitar, which aren't very sexy but are great for beginners. It forced me to learn the correct hand positions and finger exercises. The first guitar I had that felt like a 'real' musician's guitar was a Takamine dreadnought acoustic. It's an early 1970s model. My dad got me a great deal from Ivor Mairants in Rathbone Place, London."

I couldn't live without my...

"I have four Fender JV Strats. They're all from 1982 and have red or grey bobbins. Personally, I have struggled to find a Strat that plays as well as these early FujiGen Gakki models. There's just something about them – the necks are exceptional, they're reliable on the road and they sound great in the studio."

The one that got away...

"I sold a Sunburst 1963 Fender Stratocaster. For reasons I can't really remember, I traded it in and got a 1961 Cherry Red Gibson ES-345. That's also a great guitar – but I should have kept the '63 Strat."

My signature model...

"I would probably ask Duesenberg to make me their version of a Strat. I use Duesenbergs on the road. They're really good touring guitars and exceptionally comfortable on stage, plus the people at Duesenberg are very supportive. A single coil Strat-style Duesenberg would be fantastic."

The first thing I play when I pick up a guitar...

"If it's an acoustic guitar, I'll play an open E minor or a G major. Then I'll play a few chords up the neck to feel the action and the tonality. If it's an electric guitar, I'll play chords all around the 5th and 7th frets."

The best advice I've ever been given...

"There are a few pieces that still ring true.

'There are no rules.' In the music industry, that is definitely true and proven on a daily basis. 'Go with your gut.' Again, that's true. In the music industry, there are a lot of distractions and naysayers. It took me a while to learn how to filter out the noise. No-one knows anything is true when it come to the music business. Record labels in particular are populated by some of the most pointless people I've ever met. Stick to your guns and ignore the A&R guys. They'll probably be sacked within the year anyway."

My Spinal Tap moment...

"In the early days of wireless technology, we had wireless guitar systems picking up frequencies from the local mini-cab firms. On a European arena tour, we couldn't find the stage. From the dressing room to the backstage holding area, it was just a mass of identical corridors and fire doors. Eventually we got rescued by a lady from catering. During one show, I fell over and was too drunk to get up, so I played lying down for a while until the room stopped spinning."

My guilty pleasure...

"Effects pedals. I buy lots and sell some. I just love swapping them around. Some can be very inspirational for writing."

The first thing on my rider...

"No stairs. After years of weight training, I have delicate knees and a lower back. After a show, stairs are a pain – literally."

If I could just play one thing...

"Not a particular style per se but just to be able to play faster and neater when needed would be cool."

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Guitar MAGAZINE

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THE GENIUS OF SRV

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Guitar MAGAZINE

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THE GENIUS OF SRV

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH PEACH GUITARS

PRIDE & JOY

Stevie Ray Vaughan died tragically on 27 August 1990 but, over the three decades since, it's hard to think of a guitarist whose influence on guitar culture has been more enduring. In this commemorative 24-page supplement, we team up with our friends and fellow SRV devotees at Peach Guitars to celebrate the life of the Texan blues legend and take a deep dive into his gear choices and greatest guitar moments.

What's my favourite SRV moment? Fans will debate it until the end of time and perhaps it's an obvious choice but, for me, the sweat-drenched performance of *Lenny* at the El Mocambo is still one of the most breathtaking, dynamic and soulful exhibitions of electric guitar playing ever captured on film. Don't forget to write in and let us know your favourites but first, join us as we pay tribute to one of the greatest of all time.

Chris Vinnicombe
Chief Editor, Guitar.com & Guitar Magazine

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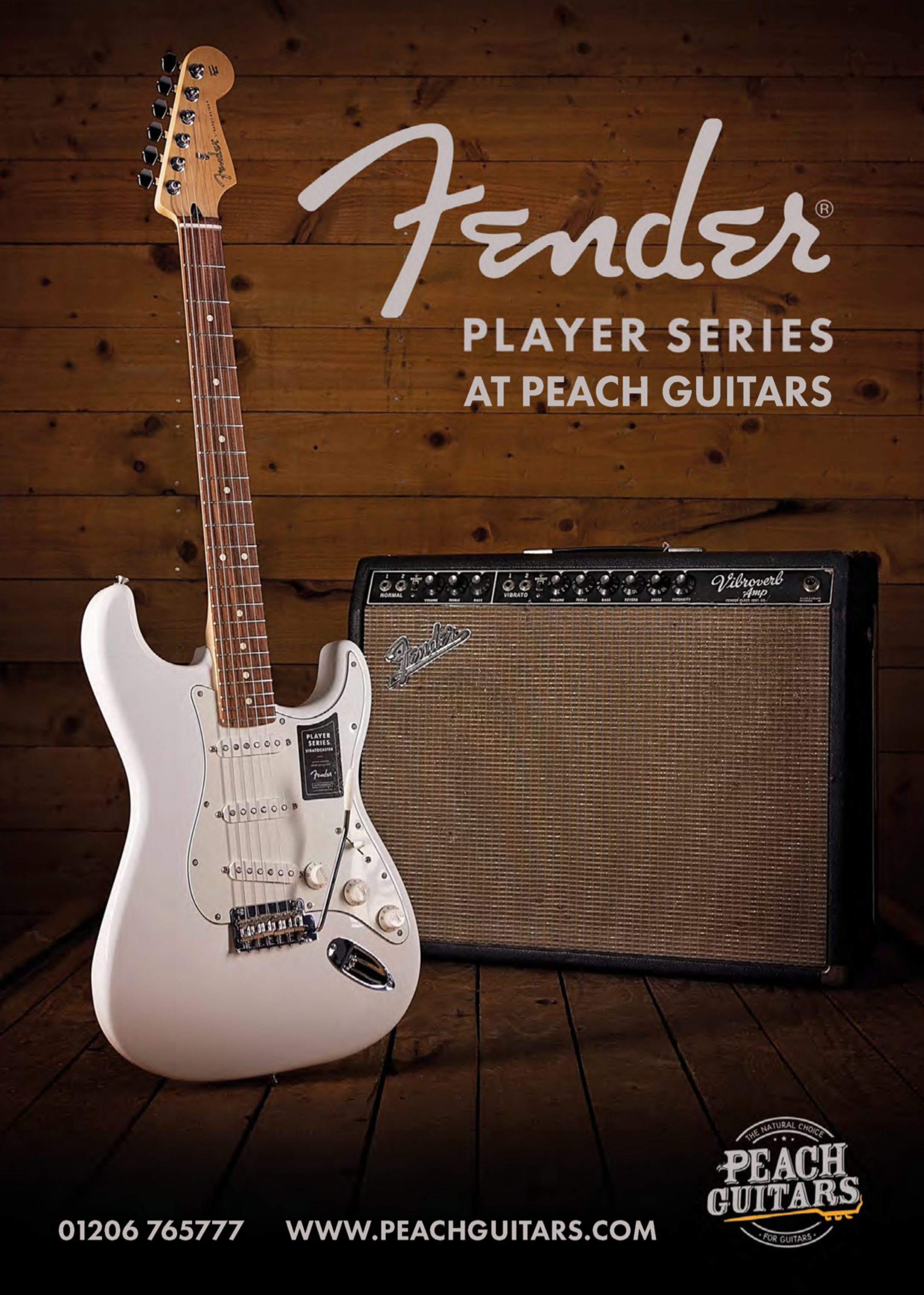

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THE GENIUS OF SRV

ALTHOUGH HIS TOP-FLIGHT CAREER WAS CRUELLY CUT SHORT, STEVIE RAY VAUGHAN REMAINS ONE OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL PLAYERS OF MODERN TIMES. FROM HIS GEAR CHOICES TO HIS PLAYING STYLE, HERE'S WHY SRV REMAINS ONE OF THE GUITAR'S TRUE ICONS

Words Michael Leonard

ABOVE Stevie Ray Vaughan's digging into Number One in 1985 – at this point it had a different 'SRV' sticker on the scratchplate than the one the instrument sports today

ABOVE CENTRE A Fender Custom Shop recreation of Stevie's most famous Strat, dubbed 'Number One'

ABOVE RIGHT SRV performing with Red, a '62 Strat that he bought in 1983 and modded with a left-handed neck in 1986

RIGHT One of Stevie's most famous Strats, Lenny is a 1963 or 1964 model bought by his wife Lenora and nicknamed accordingly

He'd have been remarkable in any era but Stevie Ray Vaughan arrived just at the right time in the long history of the electric blues. The late 1970s and early 1980s were not halcyon days for the art form: Eric Clapton's star had waned with so-so albums such as *Another Ticket* and *Money And Cigarettes*; ZZ Top were delving into the sequencer-driven MTV-rock that made them millions but ripped up their roots; the rejuvenation of Buddy Guy, John Lee Hooker and other elder legends was still some way off; and the underrated Robert Cray was making waves but his gentler, more soulful style didn't deliver the power-blues thrills many guitar players sought. Indeed, in a flurry of hairspray and spandex, hair metal was the 1980s habitat stalked by many guitarists with cranked amps seeking to summon the spirit of Jimi.

But Stevie Ray was different – refreshing, in that he looked even further back. Yes, Hendrix was a huge influence but SRV was also a keen student of Muddy Waters, Albert King, Freddie King, Chuck Berry, Lonnie Mack and Otis Rush, and he incorporated the jazz stylings of Django Reinhardt, Kenny Burrell and Wes Montgomery.

He made his name with his band Double Trouble in the music scene of Austin, Texas and, by the turn of the 1980s, had bridged the gap back to the 60s blues explosion like no other. Mick Jagger was an early admirer – he invited SRV to play a private party – and, after a 1982 performance at the Montreux Jazz Festival, David Bowie was another. Vaughan was thus soon in the unlikely position of club-level hero and simultaneous sidekick to superstars. There's no doubt SRV's guesting on Bowie's *Let's Dance* album broke his name in a way no critical roots acclaim ever could. SRV played on six of the eight *Let's Dance* tracks, and a solo deal with Epic records was soon sealed (after being given free studio time by Jackson Browne). Controversially turning down the offer to tour with Bowie, SRV got back with Double Trouble and delivered a trio of outstanding blues albums for a new era: 1983's *Texas Flood*, 1984's *Couldn't Stand The Weather* and 1985's *Soul To Soul*.

Alcoholism and collapse interrupted this incendiary run – filled by the in-concert *Live Alive* – but Vaughan returned clean and correct with 1989's *In Step*. Then tragedy struck. If he was in the right place at the right time for his rise, it was the exact opposite when he was killed in a helicopter crash in August 1990. SRV had just finished a Wisconsin show with mentors he could now consider peers:

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Eric Clapton, Buddy Guy, his brother Jimmie Vaughan and Robert Cray. At just 35, Stevie Ray Vaughan had been taken down just as he reached a personal summit.

The album he'd only just recorded with brother Jimmie, *Family Style*, was released a few months after, kicking off a Hendrix-like string of posthumous releases that have kept the music of Stevie Ray Vaughan alive for the past 30 years.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

"I loved Jimi a lot. He was so much more than just a blues guitarist. He could do anything. I was about 16 when he died. I could do some of his stuff by then but, actually, I've been trying to find out what he was doing more so lately than I was then. Now I'm really learning how to do it and I'm trying to expand on it – not that I can expand on it a whole bunch. But I try."

"To me, Django [Reinhardt] and Jimi were doing the same thing in a lot of ways. Django would do it with acoustic guitar and Jimi would do it on electric. Neither one of them had anything to build on. They just did it. Django didn't have any book or anything to borrow from. He *wrote* the book. Same with Jimi. Nobody was doing those kinds of electronic things he was doing. He just *did* it."

THE ESSENTIAL GEAR

On the surface, Stevie Ray Vaughan's gear was pretty simple, albeit modified to his own personal preferences and played with his unique foibles and inimitable style. But, at its heart, his sound was formed by the basics of a good single-coil Strat-like, a valve combo and a good overdrive pedal. Here are the details of his gear, along with some of the more reasonable choices you have.

FENDER STRATOCASTER 'NUMBER ONE'

Stevie Ray sometimes referred to his 'first wife', also known as the 'Number One' Strat, as a '59. That was, after all, the date written on the rear of the pickups. However, the guitar was a hybrid, built with a 1963 body and a late 1962 rosewood curved fingerboard neck, which Fender's Custom Shop replicated precisely with the SRV Signature Stratocaster model from 1992.

The replica was a work of considerable effort, with master builder Larry Brooks experimenting with more than 6,000 windings on the pickups, and the polarity of the middle pickup reversed to eliminate hum. You can still buy it – for little more than £2,000. Since 2019, it's also been available in a relic'd version. It has all the details of SRV's model, including the left-handed upside-down vibrato.

ABOVE SRV on stage with Number One at Umbria Jazz Festival in Italy, 1985

Stevie Ray had adopted it in homage to Hendrix and, although it allowed him to operate the trem with his elbow, this is probably a detail most players can forego. But even vintage versions of the Custom Shop signature are now collectable: we recently saw a relic'd 2004 Number One handcrafted by master builder John Cruz listed at more than £50,000.

YELLOW, RED, LENNY AND OTHERS

Stevie Ray was a man of simple tastes, with most of his other Fenders being of a similar stripe to the Number 1. But each has become iconic and beloved by fans and guitar aficionados in their own way.

Yellow was a 1959 Stratocaster formerly owned by Vanilla Fudge's lead guitarist Vince Martell: this is the one with the SRV decal *under* the strings.

Red was a 1962 Sunburst Fender Stratocaster bought from Charley's Guitar Shop in late 1983, though Stevie Ray had it repainted by Fender in Fiesta Red as a custom colour. It later had his SRV decal applied and a left-handed neck fitted (in 1986) in another visual tip of the hat to Hendrix. That neck was briefly fitted to Number One in 1989, which leads to some confusion when you're looking back at pictures from the era.

Lenny is perhaps the most famous of Stevie's 'other' Strats, a 1963 or 1964 Stratocaster bought for Stevie Ray for his birthday by his wife Lenora. Originally Three-tone Sunburst with a rosewood neck, it was later stripped down to a dark natural finish and refitted with a mid-1950s-style maple neck, reportedly given to him by Billy Gibbons. Fender Custom Shop produced a limited-edition run of Lenny replicas in 2007 but they are also now highly priced second-hand.

AMPS, EFFECTS, ETC

For amps, Stevie Ray kept things relatively straightforward. He usually picked from 1960s vintage black-panel Fender Super Reverbs, a Marshall Club & Country combo amp with 2x12" JBL speakers, and a pair of black-panel Fender Vibroverb amplifiers (numbers five and six off production line), each with one 15-inch speaker.

It's always worth bearing in mind that Stevie Ray saw things somewhat uniquely though. He once said, "I use the Fenders for distortion and the Marshall for clarity", which is of course the complete opposite of what you'd expect. His core sound generally had a medium crunch, with the bass rolled off and the mid boosted.

For effects, Stevie is often associated with that most ubiquitous of drive pedals, the Ibanez Tube Screamer. In fact, there's an argument to be made that the humble TS would be a lot less popular than it is today if not for Stevie Ray's patronage.

Stevie tended to update to whatever the latest model was, using the TS-808, TS9 and TS10 models at various times. When it came to wah pedals, he followed his hero Hendrix in favouring a Vox model. For a more in-depth look at how you can capture his tone, whatever your budget, turn to our expert gear guide on p18.

PLAYING STYLE

It's simplistic to call SRV 'just' a blues player. He incorporated a lot of funk and jazz too, leading to the crystalline Wes Montgomery-inspired *Riviera Paradise*, the Django-like *Lenny*, the funky *Couldn't Stand The Weather* and more.

How do you replicate it yourself? This is probably the hardest part of all. Like every guitar great, it was how – and not what – Stevie Ray played that made him so unique. However, to get you in the basic ballpark, you should remember that he generally tuned to E♭, and also played 0.013-gauge strings, which will be a challenge for many players to wrangle. Even Stevie himself later dropped down a size from such monstrous cables.

If you're not quite ready to step up that far just yet, try out a set of 0.010s as a minimum. Remember though, that Stevie Ray Vaughan was a physical and powerful player, particularly with his right hand, so you'll want to use strings that can measure up to that sort of big-bend punishment if you're looking to faithfully emulate his endlessly appealing feel and tone. G

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SRV'S

GREATEST GUITAR MOMENTS

RANKED

ONE OF THE TRUE GUITAR HEROES, STEVIE RAY VAUGHAN REINVIGORATED THE BLUES FOR A NEW GENERATION OF PLAYERS WITH HIS PHENOMENAL STYLE. HERE ARE 20 OF HIS FINEST MOMENTS

WORDS OWEN BAILEY

Back in 1983, David Bowie's *Let's Dance* hit the airwaves. Stinging, badass blues-guitar licks leapt out of the mix, demanding to be heard. Against the slick contemporary backdrop of the Nile Rodgers-masterminded production, the sounds were fresh and exhilarating, yet seemed to come from another time altogether. Eric Clapton recalled that when he heard the song on the radio, he stopped his car and said, "I have to know who this guitar player is today. Not tomorrow but today."

Stevie Ray Vaughan had made a lasting first impression. Over the seven years between his debut and his tragic death in a helicopter crash on 27 August 1990, he was prolific, creating four studio albums with his band Double Trouble, a collaborative album with his brother Jimmie, and a rich archive of live and studio recordings, plus film, guest appearances and more.

Today, 30 years on, his effect on the course of guitar has been profound: most recently, Alan Paul and Andy Aledort's book *Texas Flood* has uncovered fresh and comprehensive insight into Stevie's life and music, and is a must-read for fans. Here, in tribute to SRV's legacy, we present 20 guitar highlights from his too-brief but extraordinary career.

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20 TESTIFY

Originally an Isley Brothers gospel track featuring pre-Experience Jimi Hendrix underpinning the brothers' unchained vocals with tasteful R&B guitar, *Testify* was tackled by Stevie Ray on his 1983 debut LP *Texas Flood*. SRV channelled the track's irrepressible, taut energy through his six strings, first bringing his mastery of Hendrix's inventive chord work to the fore before launching into the Jimi trick bag with untamed ferocity in the instrumental's progressively more intense solos. As with the whole of his debut album, his varied use of effects and his cycling through the pickup-selector switch to vary his tone is instinctive.

SECOND STRING

This is one of the few tracks on SRV's debut *Texas Flood* that isn't a complete 'live' take. The guitarist broke a string during this recording; rather than lose what they had, the band seamlessly dropped back in together instead

19 SUPERSTITION

Though the band were plagued by Steve Ray and Tommy Shannon's substance abuse during the period when 1986's *Live Alive* was comped together from four separate concerts, this muscular cover of the Stevie Wonder classic papers over the cracks in quite some style. A showcase for what keys player Reese Wynans brought to the band when he joined in 1985, SRV hits his guitar so hard throughout that he almost hammers the strings out of tune. The solo, meanwhile, is a blinding fireworks display – from the piercing opening notes through to the climactic build that closes the song, it's about 90 seconds of Stevie at his greasy, funky, supercharged best.

VERY SUPERSTITIOUS

This Stevie Wonder cover had been in SRV's repertoire since he was 19 and playing in Austin band The Nightcrawlers with Marc Benno, which he joined in 1973

© Annamaria DiSanto / WireImage / Getty Images

18 PIPELINE

The brothers Vaughan fulfilled their dream of recording an LP together with 1990's Nile Rodgers-produced *Family Style*, and their paths often crossed as they forged their respective careers. On occasions when their bands shared the bill, they would perform a guitar party piece. The pair would play a duet on a custom-made double-necked instrument created by Houston's Robin Guitars. Perhaps the most famous example took place on New Orleans' *President*, a steamboat-cum-concert venue (the clip can be seen on YouTube). After a few minutes of noodling, the brothers launch into classic surf instrumental *Pipeline*, performing the tune with eerie synchronicity, Jimmie with his arms hooked under his brother's, their hands perfectly mirroring each other. The overall effect is pretty unsettling, as though some strange quad-limbed genetic experiment created purely to slay on guitar has taken to the stage. But it's a touching moment of brotherly bonding too.

LIFE'S A BEACH

SRV traded licks with King of the Surf Guitar Dick Dale on a version of *Pipeline* used in the 1987 beach-party parody film *Back To The Beach*

17 LIFE BY THE DROP

Stevie Ray on a 12-string shouldn't work. But watching his 1990 appearance on *MTV Unplugged* and seeing him tear through *Rude Mood* on a Guild JF65-12 shows that he was able to transplant his electric-guitar style note for note into the acoustic realm. *Life By The Drop*, written by Stevie's friend and writing partner Doyle Bramhall together with his wife Barbara Logan, was recorded during the *In Step* sessions in the unadulterated and confessional 12-string-and-voice form eventually heard on the posthumous *The Sky Is Crying* collection. A technically simple song from a guitar point of view, it nonetheless reveals SRV in a rare musical context closer to the ancient source of his electric blues.

TUNE IN, DROP OUT

Barbara Logan says the song's lyrical themes are about Doyle Bramhall watching his friend attain success

16 SAY WHAT!

Ever wondered what it sounds like to play two wah pedals at the same time? Here's your answer. During 1985's protracted sessions for third studio album *Soul II Soul* at the Dallas Sound Lab studio, Stevie Ray distracted himself with this experiment, coming up with the fearsomely modulated tone that metamorphoses throughout this visceral guitar workout. Clearly enjoying the unexpected sounds he was summoning and leaning heavily into the near-infinite sustain coming from his wall of amps, Stevie alternates between waves of his now familiar lightning-fast licks and his lingering vibrato-arm phrasing, following the tone into unprecedented areas – and having a fantastic time doing it.

TRADE SECRET

One of the two SRV wah pedals on this track had once belonged to Jimi Hendrix; Jimmie Vaughan had traded it with Hendrix's roadie in 1968

15 MARY HAD A LITTLE LAMB

Before they became good friends, Buddy Guy was one of Stevie Ray's guitar heroes. On this cover of Guy's 1967 nursery-rhyme adaptation, SRV plays his homage reasonably straight, keeping the opening riff, the bell-toned solos and the stop-start format, but wisely replacing Guy's inimitable tortured vocal with a much gentler delivery. In among the histrionics found elsewhere on debut LP *Texas Flood*, this song's restraint and laid-back feel illustrates just how much depth there was to Stevie's musicality. When he chose not to rely on flurries of notes and volume, he was able to make his point just as effectively by effortlessly turning to clean tones, sax-like phrasing, silence and space, and varying the timings of his lead lines instead.

A-TISKET, A-TASKET

Double Trouble drummer Chris Layton told Alan Paul and Andy Aledort that *Mary Had A Little Lamb* was one of his personal favourites. "It's so tight," said Chris, "The way we all hit that one note together after Stevie says 'Tisket' always sounded so cool"

14 TIGHTROPE

SRV's near-death experiences with addiction were fresh in his mind when he embarked on the recording of *In Step* in 1988, his first studio record since *Soul II Soul* three years earlier. Facing the environment substance-free for virtually the first time was understandably intimidating and SRV spent hours coaxing the right sounds from his temperamental amps. When he did come to record though, the Double Trouble sound had become more expansive and slicker as a result. *In Step* has many moments of spectacular clarity and the sinuous solo sections on *Tightrope* (both unusually backed by rhythm guitar, and mixing major and minor) are a perfect example of the laser focus of a cleaner, leaner SRV.

UP THE WALL

SRV's *In Step* amp arsenal was named the Wall of Doom and consisted of selections of eight or 10 amps from the 32 he brought to the studio with him

13 TIN PAN ALLEY (AKA ROUGHEST PLACE IN TOWN)

Recording for Double Trouble's 1984 sophomore LP *Couldn't Stand The Weather* took place in New York's Power Station studios over 19 days in January of that year, with the legendary John Hammond operating as executive producer. On the first day of the sessions, producer/engineer Richard Mullen asked the band to run through some sounds, which saw them launch into this 1950s slow blues numbers. Throughout the nine-minute take that ensued, SRV put in a faultless, emotionally charged performance, varying dynamics and conjuring up a series of endlessly inventive jazz-inflected guitar forays as though soundtracking a vivid film noir rolling in his imagination. It's safe to say the take was a keeper.

CHARLEY SAYS

For *Tin Pan Alley (AKA Roughest Place In Town)*, SRV is thought to have used a guitar named Charley, a white custom S-type instrument with three lipstick pickups that was created for him by Dallas guitar-shop owner Charley Wirz

12 COLD SHOT

Co-written by Mike Kindred, the pianist in SRV's early band Triple Threat Revue, *Cold Shot* appeared on Double Trouble's second album, *Couldn't Stand The Weather*. Stevie Ray used a Fender Vibratone cabinet to create the menacing strut of its riff, while the organ-like tone enables him to subtly incline his playing approach towards the bass-and-chord style of blues organ players, while still retaining the expressive scrapes and bends unique to his beloved six-string. Taking advantage of the song's moody minor key, Stevie uses doublestops and dissonant two-string harmony licks for emphasis throughout. For any players interested in getting acquainted with the ins and outs of Stevie's style, *Cold Shot* may just be the perfect place to start.

SHOT IN THE DARK

Unbelievably, the recording of *Cold Shot* featured on *Couldn't Stand The Weather* is the first time the band had played the song through from beginning to end

11 CROSSFIRE

SRV and Double Trouble's only single to reach the top spot on the US Billboard Mainstream Rock Charts was a team effort. Written by Double Trouble, Bill Carter and Ruth Ellsworth, this *In Step* track features judicious horn stabs from the Texacali Horns, and is built around Shannon's spacious bassline. It's a unique song in the SRV catalogue, and the ideal canvas for his question and answer guitar fills between the vocals and for his amazing solo construction to shine through. It's one of the best showcases of his ability to rinse infinite variety out of the minor pentatonic by varying his timing around the song's accents, repeating bends, and blending doublestops and single-note licks.

FLYING VISIT

Legendary blues guitarist Albert King appeared at the studio on several occasions during the recording of *In Step*

10 SCUTTLE BUTTIN'

Playing along to records in his bedroom until they either wore down or were snapped in half by his irate dad turned SRV into an imaginative interpreter of classic instrumentals. *Scuttle Buttin'* is to Lonnie Mack's *Chicken Pickin'* what *Rude Mood* is to Lightnin' Hopkins' *Hopkins' Sky Hop* – a fleet-fingered reinterpretation intensified by the Stevie Ray Vaughan filter while still retaining every ounce of the original track's thrilling spirit. At just 1:52, it's over before it begins but if, like so many SRV fans before you, you're determined to learn to play it, expect to spend some quality time perfecting the intro lick alone.

SCUTTLE WHAT?

On later tours, SRV created a live medley of *Scuttle Buttin'* and *Say What!* – try and learn that, if you dare

9 LITTLE WING

Jimi Hendrix's original recording has always seemed almost spitefully abbreviated by its fade-out. SRV's intimate extended instrumental version, released on posthumous album *The Sky Is Crying*, goes some way towards making amends. It also provides a fascinating way to compare the two players: the overlaps and departures in the interpretation of the unaccompanied intro, the note choices, the direction each takes the solo in, and the way they navigate around the changes all make a mockery of notion idea that SRV was just a counterfeit copy of his idol. Jimmie Vaughan told Dan Forte in the album's sleeve notes: "More than anything I can think of, this one shows all of Stevie's different influences on one song. It gets real tender and then it gets real tough. It's hard for me to listen to it because it feels like he's right in the room with you."

SKY'S THE LIMIT

SRV won a posthumous Grammy for this song in 1992 after it appeared on *The Sky Is Crying*

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8 COULDN'T STAND THE WEATHER

The title track from Double Trouble's second album is an oddly uncharacteristic song that doesn't really have a parallel anywhere else in the SRV canon. It hurls together a number of disparate elements – a descending chord progression in the intro, a faltering unison bass-and-guitar riff, and Nile Rodgers-esque funk-guitar workout, as well as droning single-chord verses – into what could have been a mess if left to less-skilled hands. But it stands up magnificently thanks to the presence of Jimmie Vaughan holing things together with rhythm guitar and Stevie outdoing himself with the solo sections, which combine fierce vibrato, some of his finest Albert King-derived bends, and a selection of contrasting effects-slathered tones.

OUT OF PHASE

SRV used the Roland Dimension D chorus unit to add phasing to the song's solos

7 LET'S DANCE

Thanks to David Bowie witnessing Double Trouble's performance at the Montreux Jazz Festival in 1982, SRV earned himself an almighty career break – and was faced with a sliding-doors moment – before he even had a deal for his debut record. But he still had to go and deliver the goods.

There can't have been many more pressurised situations in music history than this unsigned guitarist turning up at a top studio to add solos to an album by a household-name rock star, in an alien musical style – and with Nile Rodgers in the control room.

Apparently though, a Strat, a lead, a Super Reverb amp and otherworldly talent can be enough, and the results speak for themselves. SRV leaned into his Albert King mode and skilfully adapted to the drama and space in the arrangements to send seismic shockwaves through the guitar and pop world.

IN MEMORIAM

Nile Rodgers produced SRV's final studio work, the *Family Style* album, and delivered a eulogy at Stevie Ray's funeral

6 PRIDE AND JOY

Double Trouble's first single was an early SRV composition that spread the Texas blues-shuffle sound far and wide. From its attention-grabbing intro lick onwards, it's a joyous celebration of good-time R&B underpinned by a virtuoso guitar performance. Stevie's rhythm-and-lead style intersperses the walking bassline with scooped muted strings alongside rock 'n' roll embellishments in the verses, conjuring the sound of several guitar tracks running in unison. From then on, each of its solo sections ups the ante as Stevie Ray darts around the neck at lightning pace, imitating slide-guitar riffs, making hay from ringing open strings, and putting runs of ascending doublestops together before casually breaking out into perfectly timed flashes of lead guitar.

ANOTHER DIMENSION

As well as Jackson Browne's Dumble amp, *Pride And Joy* features a Roland SDD-320 Dimension D chorus

5 RUDE MOOD

Based loosely on *Hopkins' Sky Hop*, the Lightnin' Hopkins track from 1954, the year SRV was born, *Rude Mood* is an instrumental juggernaut that's equal parts technical dexterity and incredible stamina. Stevie was influenced in his macho attitude to string gauges by his brother and, until his later career, often used 0.013–0.058-gauge sets on his Strat, which was modified with bigger frets and detuned a half step. *Rude Mood* shows the extent of his commitment – this was a man who would perform his own skin grafts with superglue – and how faultless his co-ordination and execution was, spinning chicken pickin', supercharged rock 'n' roll licks, chord-melody excursions, Freddie Kingisms and more into a brutal, metronomic tour de force.

RUDE AWAKENING

Rude Mood was nominated for Best Rock Instrumental Performance at the 1984 Grammy Awards but lost out to Sting's *Fire And Brimstone* – ah, *that* old classic

© Robert Knight Archive / Redferns / Getty Images

4 LENNY

SRV's debut *Texas Flood* was an impressively slick and fiery assault on the senses and sensibilities of guitar players at the time but one listen to the languid, dreamy instrumental that closes the record confirmed something else: there were clearly hidden depths to Stevie Ray's style just waiting to be explored. Splicing together majestic sixth and major 13th chords with Hendrix-by-way-of-Mayfield doublestops, aquatic whammy-bar shimmers, piercing harmonics and a lot more besides, this was a far cry from the in-your-face set that preceded it. The 1983 concert version on *Live At El Mocambo*, where SRV sits on the side of the stage at the end of the gig, cigarette burning down as he channels incredible music through his maple-neck 1965 Strat Lenny, is a timeless moment in SRV lore.

LENNY AT THE CROSSROADS

At Eric Clapton's 2004 Crossroads Guitar Auction, Lenny, SRV's $300 Stratocaster, was sold to Guitar Center for $623,500 – now that's appreciation

3 TEXAS FLOOD

This classic slow blues track unfurls like the dark rolling clouds depicted in its lyrics and became an early calling card for SRV. It's a relatively close retread of Joe Scott and Larry Davis' 1958 original, right down to Fenton Robinson's opening guitar hook and Davis' sorrowful delivery. But, in typical Stevie style, the intensity is ramped up by extra guitar solos and his impassioned vocal. If string vibrato is the fingerprint of the blues guitar player, then *Texas Flood* is among the best places to hear SRV's – it's every bit as distinctive here as BB King's. As he repeats the phrasing of the song's main refrain time after time, he introduces something new on every pass: pinched bends, whammy bar, descending turnarounds, picked chord inversions, held notes, diving dissonances, sudden unexpected octave changes. Nothing is off limits here – and everything is authentic.

GET YOUR FEET WET

The title track was the only song used from the first day of the *Texas Flood* album sessions. The entire rest of the album was recorded over the following two days

2 VOODOO CHILD (SLIGHT RETURN)

Covering Hendrix note for note is a hiding to nothing, especially when it comes to one of his most magical, sacrosanct creations. Compared side by side, Stevie Ray's version of Hendrix's demonic jam swaps some of the psychedelic wah-and-vibrato noisemongery out in favour of a more mannered and musically focused take, at least on record. Live, the Texan often went completely out there with *Voodoo Child (Slight Return)*, employing his full repertoire of Jimi-esque showmanship and wanton guitar abuse in the process. While the execution might have been slightly different, the spirit, intent and energy are all redlining on what is surely the best Hendrix cover of all time.

RETURN THE FAVOUR

Once again, the seven-minute on *Couldn't Stand The Weather* was recorded live, with no overdubs

© Clayton Call / Getty Images

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RIVIERA PARADISE

Controversial though it may be, no matter how much of an SRV fan you are, it's still possible to dismiss *Riviera Paradise* as little but expertly played musak. Yet to many others, it's perhaps the ultimate expression of Stevie's soul as a guitar player. The song's mythical status is also due in part to it being the closing track on the final Double Trouble album – it's easy to interpret this as a cathartic outpouring of emotion after Stevie Ray had finally overcome his tribulations. He was just getting started but he'd already done so much.

What's not in doubt, though, is the ethereal quality of the playing. At one point, SRV scrapes his pick across the strings behind the nut, using the vibrato arm to give the notes a cadence as they fall in a distracted way, as though he's almost forgotten he's playing. After, he launches into an outpouring of notes that only he could pull off, raking the strings, fingers blurring, consumed by the moment. SRV's playing was often likened to a pure channel that music flowed through, and this specific run in *Riviera Paradise* is one such example.

Similar to how *Riders On The Storm* was the last song recorded by all four members of The Doors but still pointed tantalisingly to new musical possibilities, *Riviera Paradise* revealed a glimpse of yet another dimension to the extraordinary guitar playing of Stevie Ray Vaughan.

CUTTING IT FINE

The band finished the song just seconds before the tape ran out on the *Riviera Paradise* recording

© Gary Gershoff / Getty Images

John's scratch-perfect Custom Shop recreation of 'Lenny'

THE EXPERT VIEW

JOHN PRIEST IS THE OWNER OF PEACH GUITARS IN COLCHESTER AND, IN ADDITION TO BEING THE CUSTODIAN OF BRITAIN'S LARGEST GUITAR SHOWROOM, HE HAS A PASSION FOR STEVIE RAY VAUGHAN. JOHN WAS FIRST BITTEN BY THE SRV BUG AS A KID AND HAS THUS "SPENT YEARS AND YEARS TRYING TO NAIL THAT TONE". HERE, HE SHARES HIS HARD-EARNED WISDOM ABOUT WHAT YOU REALLY NEED TO CAPTURE THAT STEVIE RAY SOUND YOURSELF, AND PICKS OUT SOME EXEMPLAR RIGS THAT WILL GET YOU CLOSE

WORDS JOSH GARDNER

PEACH GUITARS

"I was about 11 or 12. My dad had a greatest-hits-of-the-blues album, and it had Stevie's version of *Commit A Crime* on it. That was the thing that first made me sit up and listen to all of the different aspects of his playing and tone."

John Priest is thinking back to the moment that he first encountered Stevie Ray Vaughan's guitar playing. But, for a man who has subsequently devoted a lot of time, effort and hard-earned cash to the pursuit of nailing that most sought-after tone, he wasn't as hooked as you might expect. A paid-up Hendrix obsessive at that point, he was intrigued for sure, but it wouldn't be until his dad came home with a copy of *Couldn't Stand The Weather* and he experienced Stevie's take on *Voodoo Child (Slight Return)* that he truly started paying attention..

"It was the fact that it wasn't a direct rip-off of Jimi's version," says John. "It really was a Stevie version of it. I think when other guys try to sound like other guitarists, they can get really close. They can nail the sound and the vibe and all that. But when Stevie did it – when he was taking off Albert King and Hendrix and Lonnie Mack – it still sounded exactly like him, which is one of the biggest reasons I love his playing, tone and everything.

"No matter what he did, no matter what guitar and gear he played, it always sounded like him. There was just a passion and expression in his playing. He managed to get the tone, the soul and the technique all into one, and I think that's why I still love listening to his playing today."

THE SECRETS OF SRV'S TONE

For decades now, players, gear companies and everyone in between have been trying to nail the recipe of gear, playing style and feel that gave Stevie Ray's guitar tone that wonderful mix of power and shimmer.

As someone who has spent more time than most devoting himself to both sounding and playing like the iconic Texas bluesman, John has a few helpful notes of caution for people who might just be diving into this world for the first time. Chief among them: steady as you go.

"I think a lot of people – probably myself included – try and learn too fast," he says. "They try to do *Scuttle Buttin'* on the first attempt and then fail. In terms of the SRV sound, you really have to back off that gain – there's so little compression in Stevie's sound. People tend to mask their sound with gain and EQ and compression but Stevie's sound really does come from turning an amp up loud and hitting it with a pedal. As soon as you use too much compression and make it easy for yourself, you don't get that huge tone that SRV is known for."

MINTED RIG

Fender Custom Shop
Dale Wilson Masterbuilt 60s Stratocaster (£7,500)

Two-Rock
Silver Sterling Signature (£5,895)

King Tone
The Duellist (£349)

King Tone
miniFUZZ Si (£259)

Xotic
XW-1Wah (£222)

John's high-end SRV setup: a stunning Dale Wilson Masterbuilt Strat, a 150-watt Two-Rock and a bevy of boutique effects

Indeed, if you truly want to nail that driven and characterful SRV tone, you might have to make yourself decidedly louder than many of us are used to – and you'll likely need a hell of a lot of volume to get there.

"It's is a very difficult sound to play with, because it's all about power stage drive rather than preamp gain," says John. "You can get some passable tones at home at low volumes if you do crank the gain up a bit more but when you turn the amp up, if you're using too much gain, you won't get the dynamics of his sound.

"His best-ever tone for me is on *Live At The El Mocambo*, when he's got the two Fender amps – the Vibroverb and the Super Reverb and that's about it. He's basically just using a Tube Screamer, and he's getting so much out of the guitar, just through power stage drive from the amps, and then he's hitting the Tube Screamer harder when he wants a bit more volume and extra give up at the high end past the 12th fret."

There's another key component to SRV's tone that is, thankfully, easier to try out for yourself. It's also perhaps the most commonly debated: super-heavy strings.

"You've got to have the big strings and the guitar has got to be tuned to E♭," John insists. "In fact, the tuning is the biggest part. If you don't want to go quite to the 0.013-0.058s that Stevie used, even if you use 0.010s, when you tune down to E♭, it just gives you that extra low-end punch, and it definitely shifts the frequency of the treble down so you get that brightness without it being so harsh. Then you've got to get the amp to the point where it's just on the edge of breaking up, and then hit it with a low-gain overdrive."

THE SRV SHOPPING LIST

As befits someone who owns one of Britain's most-respected guitar stores, it's perhaps unsurprising that John also has plenty of advice about what gear you should buy if you're really trying to capture the character of Stevie Ray. Here, he's pulled together two exemplary rigs that should help you get as close as possible (though the playing you'll have to do yourself).

The first is for the discerning SRV aficionado prepared to drop serious wedge on their signal chain. The second is geared towards those looking to capture the essence of Stevie's tone on a modest budget. But both will have you mastering the *Tightrope* in no time.

GUITARS

For the high-end rig, John's guitar may seem slightly incongruous. The Fender Custom Shop has made a variety of SRV guitars over the years (many of which John owns), so his choice of the undeniably stunning Dale Wilson Masterbuilt 60s Strat here comes as a bit of surprise.

"I just wanted to use a more standard 1960s-style Strat to show that it can nail that kind of tone," he says. "You just need a good 1960s-style Strat with a rosewood 'board and some fairly low-output pickups.

John's more modest rig features a Player Strat and Blues Junior, with the all important TS and wah

SKINTED RIG

Fender Player Stratocaster (£519)

Fender Blues Junior IV (£569)

Ibanez Tube Screamer Mini (£58)

Jim Dunlop GCB95 Cry Baby Wah (£79)

You also need some big frets so you can string the guitar up with heavier strings, which makes that playing style a bit easier to achieve. If you try to use heavy strings with a 7.25-inch radius and vintage frets, you're really going to struggle. But if you have the big frets and a slightly flatter radius, it should really suit those big heavy strings."

At the less expensive end of the scale, John's picked Fender's Player Stratocaster. Despite its humble price, this guitar has lots to offer SRV wannabes.

"I chose that because the alnico pickups sound great in them. They've got a really nice chime and respond well to overdrive," says John. "Plus, they've got slightly larger frets and a player-friendly radius on the fingerboard, so if you do want to use those heavier strings, it's going to be in the right ballpark. I just think the Player Stratocasters are really good-value guitars. They play well. I would have loved to have had one of those as my first SRV-style Strat, that's for sure!"

AMPLIFIERS

Given that Stevie Ray's use of Alexander Dumble's amps later in his career contributed significantly to the legend surrounding them in modern guitar culture, it's perhaps no surprise to see our premium rig blessed with an amp from a brand that is hugely respected for its Dumble-style circuits: Two-Rock. In this case though, the Silver Sterling Signature is altogether more interesting than a simple 'Dumble clone'.

"I really like the Silver Sterling Signature because I love Stevie's tone on *Live At The El Mocambo*, which was just Fender amps. Then later on, when he started playing bigger gigs outside, the 40-50-watt Fender amps were never going to give enough penetration in the sound or enough thump in the low end, so he often blended in a Steel String Singer so that he still had that massive thump at the bottom end and that clarity in the highs.

"I chose the Silver Sterling Signature as it's almost the two amps blended into one. With this one, you get the huge headroom of the Dumble amp but you also get that sparkle. Of course, it works so well with the pedals too, because there's just so much headroom.

"I'd never refer to the Two-Rocks as Dumble clones because Eli [Lester] and the guys over there are just nuts about amps. They love all kinds of amps, not just the Dumbles. Eli's got a wonderful collection of guitars and amps, and he's become a good friend since we started selling Two-Rock amps. We're both Stevie nuts too, so I think if you want that Stevie-style Dumble tone, there's nobody better than Two-Rock to help you achieve that sound. It's not an easy sound to play with but if you put the effort in, this amp should prove key to that sort of tone. Very little compression, not too much gain, not too much top end, and it should give you that clarity with lots of low end."

For the lower-priced rig, John's picked out that trusty old workhorse of the gigging world: the Fender's Blues Junior.

"It's great to have something like the Two-Rock in your rig – but it's 150 watts," says John. "So when you're at home, unless you're going to attenuate it right down, you're never going to get anything usable. The Blues Junior is a great little amp, because you can play straight into the front end and just roll the volume down if you want it a little cleaner. It's got a good clean yet dirty base rhythm sound that you can use pedals to push."

EFFECTS PEDALS

What SRV-tone buyer's guide would be complete without a word on effects? Stevie Ray is an enormous reason why you won't find many pedalboards without a Tube Screamer on it these days. But when it comes to giving some dirt to our top-of-the-line rig, John has opted for a pair of pedals from UK builder King Tone: The Deullist and miniFUZZ Si.

"The Duellist is the obvious choice," he says, "Because like me, Jesse Davey, the man behind King Tone, is another guy who has spent years and years trying to nail that SRV tone. Jesse knows how to listen to a sound and then make a box that can recreate it. He goes into the smallest details to make these pedals and achieve that sound. There's no-one else out there qualified to make pedals like Jesse.

"There are loads of fantastic TS-style pedals out there and I've owned most of them over the years. I have an original TS-808 that I really love too. With The Duellist, you've got those two channels, and you can set it so that one of them is a boost and the other is an overdrive, and really get some great tones out of it.

"Anyone familiar with Stevie's tone on the 1989 performance from Austin City Limits will know that it's quite a raw-sounding fuzz, with a lot of top end – he still wanted the clarity there as well. So this King Tone miniFUZZ Si is a fantastic choice. It cleans up so well – and that's really unusual because people normally go for germanium-style fuzzes when they're looking for good roll-off with the volume."

Wah was another key part of Stevie's floor-based arsenal and, for this, John plumps for Xotic's XW-1Wah – but not necessarily because of the large amount of tweaking potential on board.

"I chose the Xotic purely because it sounds so good out of the box," he says. "It has tweakable controls for the bass, treble and frequency range but, with everything on halfway, it already sounds just how I want a wah pedal to sound. It's very vocal, and it has a chewy-sounding treble. The bass isn't too fluffy either. For me, it just does the job."

A Strat with low-output pickups, big frets and a flatter radius is key for that SRV feel and tone

For those with tighter purse strings, John has kept things simple, opting for a Dunlop CryBaby wah and that all-important and irrepressibly iconic Tube Screamer to truly harness the powerful Vaughan sound. In this case, it's Ibanez's super-affordable mini version.

"I think the TS Mini sounds great," says John. "I can't hear much difference between that, the TS-9 and the TS-808. They're great value for money and they sound fantastic through that Blues Junior!"

To hear John playing through both these rigs, head to youtube.com/peachguitars, and to check the gear out for yourself, drop in to Peach's store in Colchester or visit peachguitars.com